

casual connect

Winter 2015



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Have a great app but need a publisher?

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Letter from the Director



Let's talk for a moment about lima beans.

Perhaps since the first pile of the limas was piled on a child's plate, kids have cursed the vile legume as yucky. Or worse. To which every parent has more or less responded in the same way: "Eat them. They'll be good for you."

Not to sound too paternal or anything (can you tell I just had a baby?), but when it comes to our conferences and magazines, we sometimes feel compelled to include a few legumes with the chocolate pudding.

In preparation of each conference, we brainstorm the primary themes that are especially relevant to the games industry *right now*. Of course we want to identify what it takes to succeed in the present marketplace, but we also want to prepare ourselves and the industry for the future. Which is why we are particularly interested in educating the industry about things that to some may seem dull and academic.

Likewise, in this edition of *Casual Connect*, tucked in among the usual developer profiles and game postmortems, you'll also see David Zhao's biting commentary on how dreadful mobile advertising has become—not because you were clamoring for it, but because it's something you all need to read and think about.

So read it. And think about it.

I remember at one conference I got complaints because we had spent so much time talking about monetization. "Not interesting," they said. "Too dry," they said. "Booooooring." But at the time, content creators were adjusting to business model shifts, grappling with user retention and acquisition challenges, and trying to find their way in the emerging handheld and social markets. In light of that, how could we *not* provide insight into monetization and how it was being affected by those emerging trends?

This year in Amsterdam, two primary themes were innovation in the creative process and the integration of new technology and services into the development process. We also featured new tracks focusing on research in game design as well as numerous stories from game developers on their experiences with technology.

Because, great content is our collective future.

Process. Integration. Research. Mobile advertising. I don't know which of those themes sound like lima beans to you and which like chocolate pudding, but I can promise you it's all good for you. Trust me on this. I'm a mother.

I hope you'll eat it all up.

Jenica

Jessica Tams, *Director of the Casual Games Association*
jessica@casualconnect.org

EVENT CALENDAR

4-6 February 2015

Casual Connect Europe

Beurs van Berlage
Damrak 243
1012 ZJ, Amsterdam
Netherlands



19-21 May 2015

Casual Connect Asia in Singapore

Shangri-La Hotel
22 Orange Grove Road
258350, Singapore



11-13 August 2015

Casual Connect USA in San Francisco

Hilton San Francisco
Union Square
333 O'Farrell St.,
San Francisco, CA
94102



Fall 2015

Casual Connect Israel

The inaugural Casual Connect Israel 2015 will be held in Tel-Aviv, Israel, a city easily accessible to attendees from both the East and West. Designed with a focus on new media, mid-core games, social games and investment opportunities.



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Mike Rose has been writing about video games for the better part of last decade. He worked for notable publications such as Kotaku, Gamasutra, IndieGames.com and more.

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Ned Waterhouse

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Ned has worked as a Lead Designer at Sumo on a variety of projects including *New International Track and Field* (Konami, 2008), *Nike+ Kinect Training* (Microsoft, 2012) and *Xbox Fitness* (Microsoft, 2013). In November 2013, Ned joined the *LittleBigPlanet 3* team where his responsibilities included overseeing the design of the game's UI and PlayStation 4 feature set.

Sheffield, UK

Inkle Studios
Cambridge, UK



Casual Connect Europe
Amsterdam
February 2015



Young Horses
Chicago, IL



Games That Move You
Columbus, OH



Dejobaan Games
Boston, MA

Casual Connect SF
San Francisco
August 2015

David Zhao

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David is a two-time entrepreneur with a passion for mobile app distribution. He started Voxel after becoming frustrated with the limited distribution channels that are available for mobile apps. He founded ZumoDrive, a mobile media streaming company that sold to Motorola Mobility. He has a CS degree from Univ. of Washington and started his career as a software engineer at Amazon.com.

Palo Alto, CA



Karel Crombecq

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In 2012, Karel Crombecq founded Sileni Studios to pursue his dream full-time. As a two man indie company, they have released a sequel to *Castle Quest* and a mobile game called *Evo Dash*. They are currently working on *Mayan Death Robots*, in which alien robots duke it out in the Mexican jungle during Mayan times.

Antwerp, Belgium



About the Cover



Asaf Barzilay
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As CEO of Extreme Reality, Asaf brings over 10 years of experience in IT and mobile communications, with extensive hands-on experience and an executive track record in product and project management. In Extreme Reality, he also served as VP Products. Previously, he led key OEM projects and product management operations at modu mobile.

Herzliya, Israel



Frozenbyte
Helsinki, Finland



Vizor Interactive
Minsk, Belarus



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Peleg is the GM of Bidalgo, a Facebook PMD (Marketing Partner) specializing in UA for mobile apps. With Bidalgo's proprietary technology & experience in the mobile space, they help esteemed clients such as Playtika, Zynga & Plarium scale their UA & win with unbeatable ROI.

Tel Aviv, Israel



Altitude Games
Manila, Philippines



Casual Connect Asia
Singapore
May 2015



Chester Ocampo

Run Run Super V is a sentai-themed mobile game by Altitude Games. This image shows the Super V squad rushing to stop a horde of evil robotic minions from destroying their city. Behind the squad is A.K., their trusty alpaca assistant, and looming over them is Super V's giant robot Robo-V. A tribute to the Japanese TV shows of old, *Run Run Super V* combines continuous gameplay with robot boss battles, both represented here. The artwork is a collaborative effort by the Altitude art team, led by art director Chester Ocampo.

Chester, a widely-acclaimed illustrator for games and print media, currently works as Art Director and co-founder of Altitude Games. He has done freelance illustration work for companies such as Cartoon Network, Animax, Crooz, and Electronic Arts. He was previously Art Director for Imaginary Friends Studios in Singapore.



by Mike Rose,
PR Director, *tinyBuild GAMES*
Seattle, WA

tinyBuild GAMES

Like all great things, *tinyBuild* started with an idea.

Tom Brien had just released another web game, made right there from his bedroom and sold on the Flash Game License marketplace. It was a decent life for an indie developer—you spend a couple of weeks making a web game, you put it up for bidding on the marketplace, and sell to the highest bidder in exchange for getting the buyer's branding into the game. A simple way to make money.

Alex Nichiporchik was on the other side of the fence, buying and marketing web games. It was a numbers game: You invested X and needed to get X+Y back, Y being your return—that you'd then reinvest into more games. It was all about optimizing click-through rates, and with the upcoming rise of social games, the emphasis on analytics was growing pain-

fully strong. It was starting to be as much about the numbers as it was about the fun.

Why not turn this simple game into something larger... something people would pay for on Steam?

And so, to The Idea: Alex stumbled upon Tom's latest hit Flash game in early 2011. It was called *No Time To Explain*, and Tom had made it over a single weekend. The game was

all about chasing your future self through time, as he was dragged away

by a giant alien crab. The game had punch, charisma, and was really quite hilarious.

Alex asked him: Why not turn this simple game into something larger... something people would pay for on Steam?

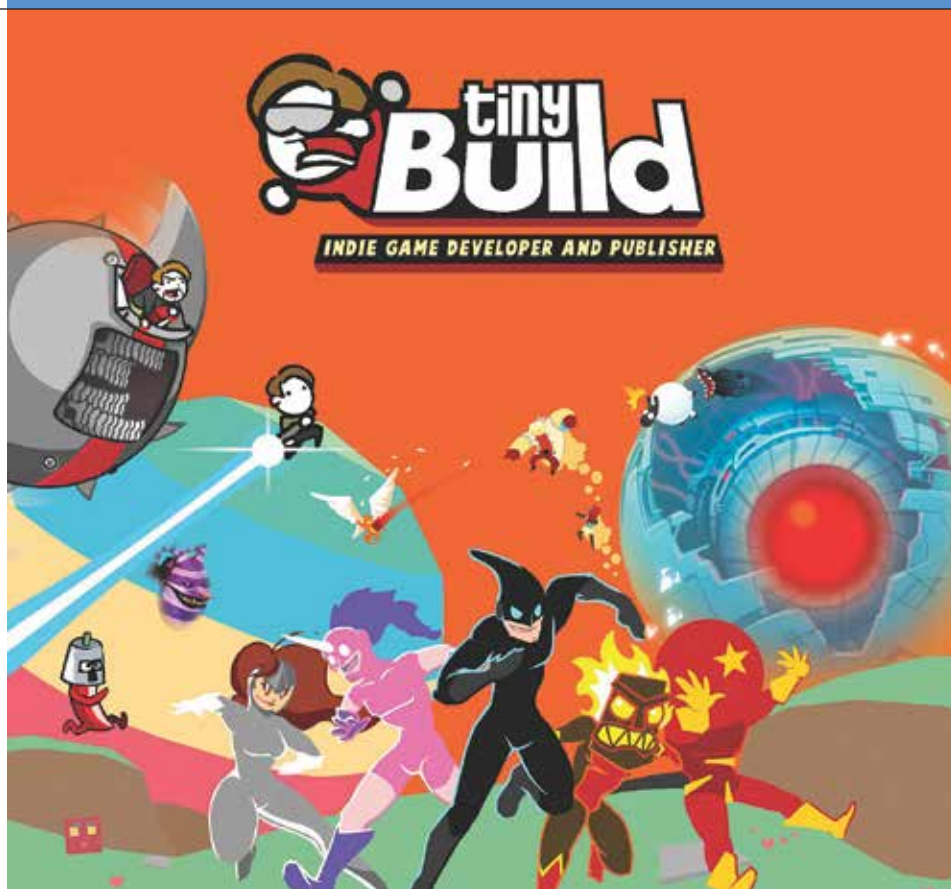
Both Alex and Tom had wanted to do something a bit more meaty for years, but never had the chance—or were too afraid to take it. *Super Meat Boy* had just released at the time—another grand indie title that was originally born as a web game before it became popular—and this turned out to be the spark of inspiration that the pair needed to take the plunge.

tinyBuild GAMES was formed.

Game #1: *No Time To Explain*

Following an adventure in crowdfunding, *No Time To Explain* made waves in the press and amongst the indie development community. The concept introduced in the original Flash game scaled very well to an exciting trailer that promised a silly comedy platformer in which





Game #2: *SpeedRunners*

Following the Steam release of *No Time To Explain*, the tinyBuild duo was worn out. Having gone through two years of uphill battles, it felt like the time to relax and not dive into any new projects for a while.

"A while" turned out to be just two weeks. In February 2013, Alex went to Casual Connect Hamburg, organized at the time by Luke Burtis. The event had a little Indie Prize showcase area "pilot," where dozens of developers were showcasing their work-in-progress indie games.

That's where Alex met Casper Van Est from DoubleDutch Games. DoubleDutch had previously released *SpeedRunner HD* on Xbox Live Indie Games, and it was in Hamburg showcasing an upcoming Steam version of the game. While the game was clearly a blast, it had rather basic visuals, which made marketing the game quite the challenge. Alex found himself in love with the concept, and after playing it for well over an hour, knew what tinyBuild's next project had to be.

When Luke quit Casual Connect right after the Hamburg show, Alex saw an opportunity to shape the future of tinyBuild. He and Luke had become friends after repeatedly bumping into each other at industry events, and the pair decided to take a weeklong cruise through the Mediterranean with their other halves, where the idea took its final form.

Thus, The Idea Deux: Why not fund the development of *SpeedRunner HD*, make it a better game, and focus on the marketing of it? Get involved in a way that would make the

you chase yourself from the future through time. Everything came together perfectly, including a record-shattering (at the time) \$26K Kickstarter and an additional \$20K funding deal from the Russian publisher Buka Entertainment.

But alas, there were many hiccups to come. Buka soon backed out "because of disappointing sales of *Super Meat Boy*," leaving tinyBuild with half its budget and no access to Steam. The team had to resort to scraping together what they had in order to finish the game, resorting to the ancient ActionScript 2 programming language. The game was then split into two parts—the first would release in Summer 2011 as promised, and it would fund the December 2011 release of Part 2.

While the release of Part 1 did get a few eyeballs, the lack of funding meant that it was plagued with technical issues, resulting in negative reviews. When Part 2 finally released, it had next to no impact. Each one was released outside of Steam as a standalone download, and both the press and players didn't seem to care much for PC games that weren't on Steam.

As 2012 continued its depressing slouch, by September tinyBuild was in limbo. Then, a

shining light: Steam Greenlight was introduced to the masses. *No Time To Explain* was one of the first games submitted to Steam's crowd-voting system that allows indie developers to self-publish games on its platform. In October 2012 the game was Greenlit, and it released on Steam in January 2013.

Since the team still had no money, *No Time To Explain*'s Steam release was similarly plagued with bugs, and consequently it received low scores from press outlets. The engine simply couldn't handle so much going on behind the scenes, nor the integration with all of the Steam APIs. And yet, none of this seemed to matter. The game was funny, and it coincided with another phenomenon about to explode in the games industry: YouTubers.

A few small YouTube channels posted "Let's Play" videos of *No Time To Explain*, and some of those videos launched the channels into popularity. The game was a perfect fit—a funny platformer that was fun to watch when it was played by likable personalities.

Within months, tinyBuild had gone from being on the rocks to having plenty of money in the bank.

tinyBuild GAMES

game better and make sure it would get the exposure it needed? This is how tinyBuild first moved into the indie publishing space: Tom would take care of all the art and personality, Alex would take charge of marketing, and Luke would handle exposure at events.

Six months later, the newly-named *SpeedRunners* got released on Steam Early Access to instant positive reception, with an insane number of people playing it at PAX Prime in Seattle.

The game went on to become a cult hit amongst YouTubers. Like a mash-up of *Mario Kart* and *Canabalt*, *SpeedRunners* is insanely competitive, yet very simple—and because it's one of the few indie multiplayer games that work online, YouTubers could get together and play it, recording their reactions and posting dozens of episodes.

The narrative woven by tinyBuild's marketing helped get people into DoubleDutch's game design, and the combination of both worked so well that by summer 2014 famous YouTube celebrities wanted to be characters in the game. As of October 2014, *SpeedRunners* in-

cluded eight YouTube personalities—including PewDiePie, Jesse Cox, Markiplier, and others—all as actual in-game characters.

And the deals kept rolling in. tinyBuild soon worked with Valve to put *Team Fortress 2*'s Scout into *SpeedRunners*, and there's even an Easter egg hidden away that allows you to play as the Goat from *Goat Simulator*. Since the game's original Early Access release in summer 2013, things have really blown up for *SpeedRunners*.

The game is now scheduled to release on Xbox One in 2015, along with an actual Steam release.

Games #3 to #10: The Publishing Adventure

As soon as the *SpeedRunners* story broke, some press outlets started labeling tinyBuild as an "indie publisher," and the company just went along with it. Luke has been managing stakeholders most of his career, and so he took charge of publishing third-party games. Unlike other publishers, the company came from an indie development background, and it still has an internal studio. As such, tinyBuild can take on third-party projects and actually add direct value to them.

Lovely Planet is a great example: The game is a trippy, first-person shooter in which you speed-run through levels. The game's developer is from India, and it had worked on it for a year before tinyBuild discovered it. The cooperation worked out rather nicely: tinyBuild financed an extra five months of development to help put final polish and balance into *Lovely Planet*, and thus it became a more marketable product. The result is a 82/100 PCGamer score, and a series of videos from YouTubers which boosted the game into a niche cult hit.



By summer 2014 famous YouTube celebrities wanted to be characters in the game. *SpeedRunners* now includes PewDiePie, Jesse Cox, Markiplier, and others as actual in-game characters.

Game #1 Again: No Time To Explain

The internal studio's next big project is remaking *No Time To Explain* within Unity, with the intention of publishing it on consoles. The company is built in a very flexible manner—people take on different responsibilities as needed, and constantly shift roles.

The experience of working with consoles and going through the certification process is invaluable. Most indie developers don't have the time or resources to go through that, and having such experience in-house within a publishing company is a distinctive advantage.

And after all of this—all these trials, tribulations and wonderful outcomes—this is merely the beginning for tinyBuild. The next year alone will see the company release multiple games across PC, console and mobile, both in-house and from third-parties, and Alex and company are still hungry for more. Expect to see the name tinyBuild pop up rather a lot in the next few years. ❄



Having gone through two years of uphill battles, it felt like the time to relax and not dive into any new projects for a while. “A while” turned out to be just two weeks.

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Infographic

Ad Campaign Dissected: *Vikings Gone Wild*

- The Platform:** iOS & Android
- Target Audience:** Males 22-40
- The Challenge:** Bidalgo was tasked to create an appealing communication strategy for relevant Facebook users
- The Objective:** To identify creative and recurring elements that lead to the highest user engagement
- The Tactics:**
 - > Wide scale creative A/B testing
 - > Defined creative optimization methodology

CREATIVE ELEMENTS





Peleg Israeli;
General Manager, Bidalgo;
Tel Aviv, Israel

TEST #1

Bidalgo evaluated the performance of 6 different creative styles & identified the most engaging elements

THE RESULTS

Discovered an "Over Performing" image

THE CONCLUSION

Users react well to the Zombie character



TEST #2

Bidalgo identified variations of zombie images combined with engaging texts

THE RESULTS

Although there was no improvement in CTR, we identified that combinations of beer texts + images showed potential

THE CONCLUSION

Game related "Power-ups" (beer) show potential

CTR=0.5%



CTR=1.4%



CTR=0.8%



CTR=0.8%



CTR=1%



TEST #3

Continued searching for additional successful elements to combine alongside the "Power-up" insight

THE RESULTS

Managed to increase the CTR significantly

THE CONCLUSION

The pack of characters shows potential

Ad campaign dissected: *Vikings Gone Wild*

TEST #4

Combined creative elements from previous successful ads

RESULTS

Succeeded in generating a HUGE increase in the CTR, achieving the highest CTR to date

CONCLUSIONS

Continue optimizing the new WINNER



TEST #5

The Bidalgo team created additional variations of successful creatives

THE RESULTS

Continued to break the CTR record!

THE CONCLUSION

Objective met!

We now have a wide set of creatives achieving a CTR of above 2%



TEST #6

Introduced a wild card
(explosions, bright colors, etc...)

THE RESULTS

We hit a new CTR record!!!!

THE CONCLUSION

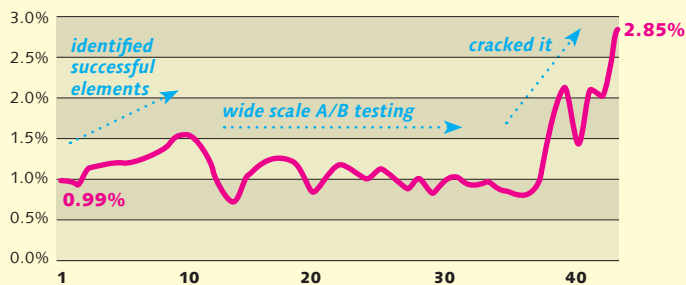
Never stop optimizing your
creatives

CTR=2.6%



CTR GROWTH THROUGHOUT THE JOURNEY

CTR BY DAY



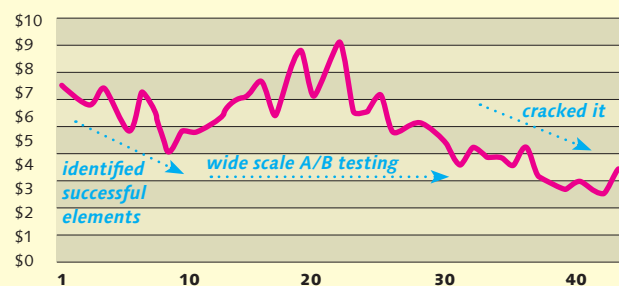
RESULTS

187% Increase

52% Decrease

CPI DECREASING

CPI BY DAY



Postmortem

Mayan Death Robots

Founded in 2012, Sileni Studios is a two-man indie studio located in Antwerp, Belgium. We previously released a web-based game called *Castle Quest* and a mobile game called *Evo Dash*, featuring music by Chipzel.

A Clockwork Riot

During the last days of 2013, we were wrapping up *Castle Quest*, which had not been the success we hoped it would be. As a studio, we were not going to survive another two-year development cycle without any reliable income, so we were looking to do a smaller project next.

One thing I've always wanted to do was make a *Worms*-like game with destructible terrain. I love the *Worms* games, but one thing I dislike about them is the long waiting. Especially when playing with more than 2 people, it can take several minutes for your turn to come around. I wanted to make a *Worms*-like game where no one had to wait, ever.

We developed a prototype in which each player aimed and shot simultaneously. We

.....
This game would definitely revolutionize the artillery genre.

used tiles instead of the typical pixel-based terrain because tiles were just easier to implement. Below left image shows what the game looked like back then.

While we were brainstorming about cool weapons, we came up with a construction gun—a weapon that allows you to rebuild terrain. This was easy to implement in a tile-based landscape, so we went ahead and added it to the game. It turned out that rebuilding terrain and setting up defenses was a lot of fun! This was our first big step towards setting the game apart from others in the genre.

We quickly slapped a theme on the game (mini robots in a huge clockwork machine), called it *Clockwork Riot*, and full of enthusiasm, we went to the Game Developer's Conference in March 2014 with a playable demo. Surely this exciting twist on the *Worms* genre would garner praise from fellow devs. Right?

The Cold Shower

GDC was a cold shower. People saw potential in the idea of simultaneous, turn-based combat on repairable destructible terrain, but they criticized the lackluster speed and the cheap, amateur graphics. We didn't have a diamond

in the rough, as we imagined it to be, but a diamond buried under a mountain of solid granite. Some serious digging was in order.

When we got back from GDC, we hit a creative slump. We kind of arbitrarily settled on the clockwork theme and stubbornly designed our graphics and gameplay around it. Hanne Maes, our artist, had a lot of trouble creating cool graphics for this setting, and I had trouble expanding the gameplay beyond the basics.

We went back to the drawing board.

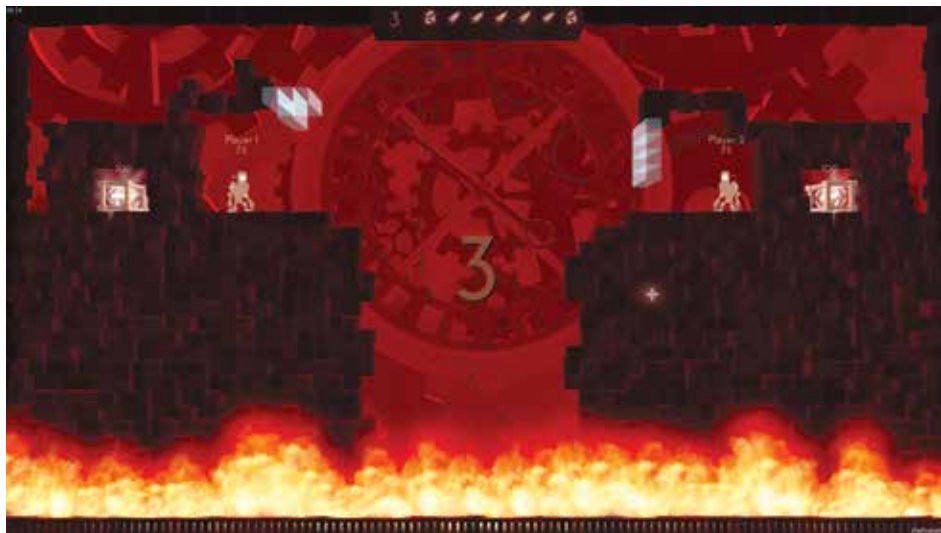
I wanted to make a *Worms*-like game where no one had to wait, ever.

Digging Deep

After a few weeks of mocking up different settings for the game, we got desperate and were ready to abandon the project. We finally had a breakthrough during a late-night brainstorming session. Which objects in the world are typically tile-based (square)? Buildings and bricks! What if we made the robots really HUGE instead of really small, and made the landscape out of square buildings? And which civilization is well-known for its tile-based architecture? The Mayans! Their temples would be a perfect fit for our tile-based landscape. At the end of March, we had a new mockup, and things were starting to fall into place.

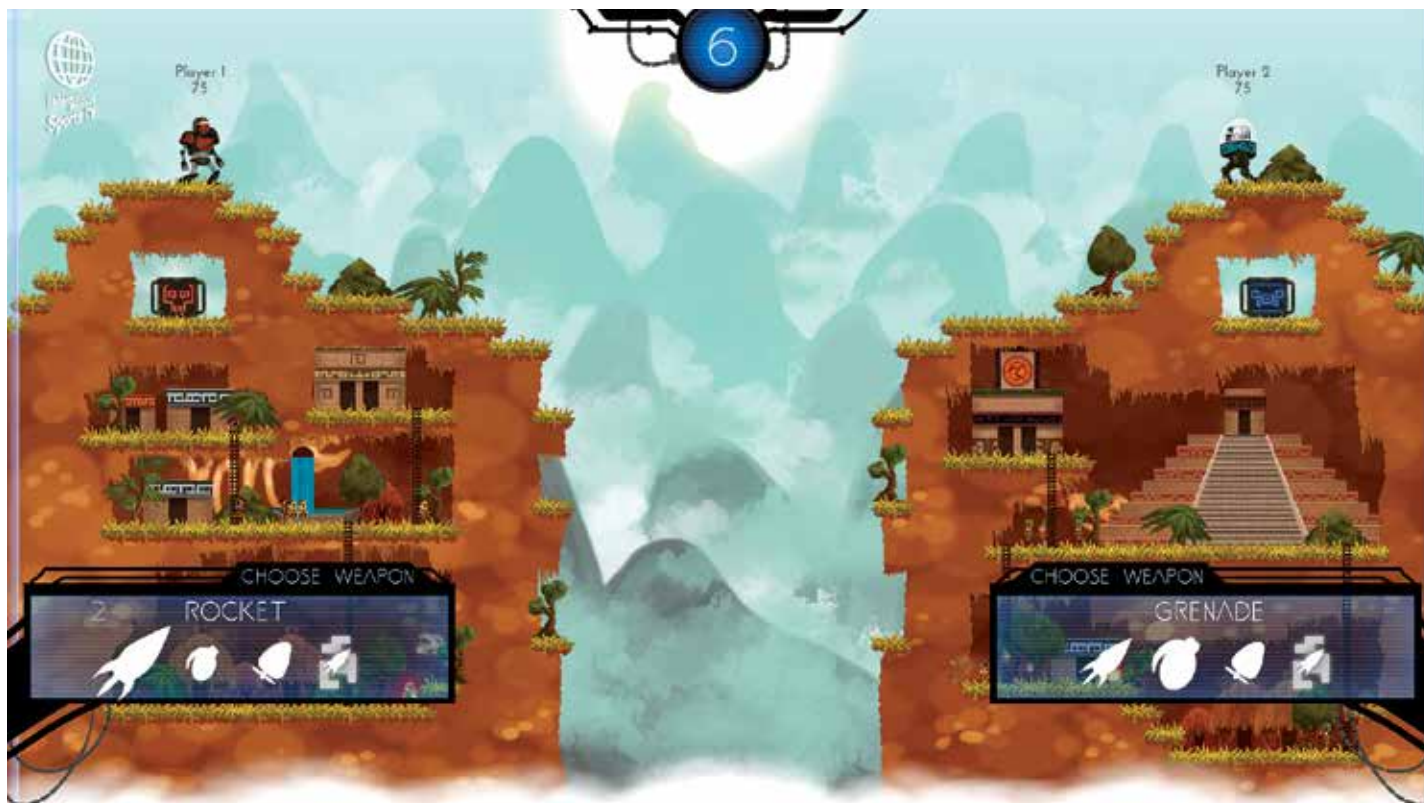
This new setting really revitalized the team, and gave us a surge of inspiration that boosted the game to new heights.

Hanne started designing new robots based on the Mayan gods, with each robot sporting unique weaponry that matched his god theme. I started coding in AI for Mayans, who would





by Karel Crombecq;
Founder, Sileni Studios;
Antwerp, Belgium



The first recognizable screenshot of *Mayan Death Robots*.

walk around in the landscape and influence the game by digging caves, building temples and fighting each other. We also had two interns at our company at that point (Mathias Berben and Sven Van Eycke), who started to work on the pixel art for the Mayans, their temples, and the jungle.

In a matter of weeks, we transformed our vague Mayan concept into a functional game

Kukulkan, the first boss added to the game.



that was brimming with potential. This was so different from one month earlier, where none of us had any idea on how to further improve the game we'd only been working on for two months. We dug deep, uncovered the diamond and brought it to the surface.

Trouble on the Horizon

But all was not well in the jungle. After we rode out the wave of euphoria, we hit another slump in the summer of 2014. We had solid gameplay with several unique and compelling features, but the graphics were not coming together, and the battles felt repetitive.

First, we tackled the gameplay. Even though we had a roster of robots, each battle still felt similar to the previous one. To break this monotony, we once again turned to the Mayan civilization for inspiration. In our game, the Mayans worship the robots as if they're gods, building temples for them and giving them offerings. But what if the real Mayan gods also existed? Wouldn't they be angry about this blasphemous robot worship?

So we added real Mayan gods to the game, in the form of boss battles that can randomly

We didn't have a diamond in the rough, as we imagined it to be, but a diamond buried under a mountain of solid granite. Some serious digging was in order.

occur during a fight, forcing both players to work together for a short period to defeat a common, super-powerful enemy. This effectively turns a head-to-head battle temporarily into a co-op experience, totally breaking monotony and adding another dimension to the gameplay.

Mayan Death Robots

With the gameplay sorted, we turned our attention to the graphics. First, we contracted a freelancer named Jordy Lakiere to do some concept art for our level design. He came back with several alternative settings for our levels, which helped both Hanne and Mathias to design more unique levels.

We also contracted Stephanie Dehennin to refine the pixel art, add some shading to our graphics, and design a logo for the game. As you can see from the side-by-side picture below, the difference was enormous.

At this key transition point, Hanne left the company and was replaced by Erwin Heylen, who brought with him a whole bunch of awesome ideas that would further shape the game!

Working off the Edges

By August 2014, we were getting very positive feedback from testers, but we encountered another issue: So much was happening on the screen that people were losing focus. A prime example was the difficulty we had to convey the objective of the game to new players. In *Mayan Death Robots*, each player has a power

The instruction screen no one read—ever. You're may be the first person to ever lay eyes on this. Seriously.



source and a robot, and the objective is to destroy the power source of the other player. But the screen was so filled with little details that people would just overlook the power source and go straight for their opponent's robot instead.

We already had an instruction screen explaining the game at the start of each match, but this only made it glaringly obvious that nobody ever reads a tutorial screen, even if it's only three sentences long.

So we removed the instruction screen and replaced it by a single huge panel saying "Destroy Your Opponent's Heart," accompanied with a massive crosshair and arrow pointing towards the Heart. Surely people would catch on to at least one of these completely in-your-face hints. Nope.

Finally, more out of desperation than anything else, we replaced our loading screen by a big instruction screen, and artificially made the loading last longer so that people would always have time to read it. We figured that the problem was not that the instructions weren't obvious, but that so much else was

More out of desperation than anything else, we replaced our loading screen by a big instruction screen, and artificially made the loading last longer so that people would always have time to read it.

happening on the screen at the same time, that the instructions got lost in the noise. By extracting the instructions from the game, and putting them in the empty loading screen, we removed all distractions and finally got the player's attention.

The New World

With the game in great shape, we set up a website with a sign-up form for the beta test. We hired a company to make a professional trailer for our game, as we didn't want to take any risks with a subpar trailer. We contacted press and YouTubers, once again confident that our awesome game would be picked up and featured on every website and YouTube channel on the planet (we never learn).



This time around though, we did get some really positive feedback. Traditional international press pretty much completely ignored us, but we were picked up by some smaller YouTubers, who were very enthusiastic about the game. Our big break, however, came when

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Mayan Death Robots

Jesse Cox covered the game, and brought over 100,000 views with him! We can't help but feel that this was really just a lucky break, though, because the reason why Jesse covered the game in the first place was because he had kind of a running joke with Mayan Death Robots going—something we were totally unaware of!

Lucky or not, after less than a week we had over 1,000 beta subscribers, and our numbers have since grown to over 1,800 thanks to more YouTube coverage and our attendance at local

Our big break came when Jesse Cox covered the game, and brought over 100,000 views with him!

game conventions. We've been getting lots of e-mails with compliments, and people are clearly spreading the word since our beta subscription numbers keep growing! We also discovered, completely to our surprise, that our game does very well with children. If we had

.....
We couldn't make it any more obvious than this.



known our target audience was 10 years old, we would've given the game a more inviting title than Mayan Death Robots! Even though the game features (cartoon) violence, it is quite suitable for children (no blood is shed!), something the title does not really reflect.

What's Next?

We are now gearing up for a first quarter 2015 release. Most mechanics are in place, and we are now adding more content: more robots, more random events, more bosses, more levels. We are also adding a narrative to the game, a feature that will be uncovered in one of our upcoming beta releases!

So what did we learn from all this? We learned that sometimes good gameplay does



not immediately show itself, and that it may need a lot of digging to unearth the game's full potential. We learned that finding the right theme for your gameplay mechanics is extremely important and helps inspire new mechanics. We learned that you might still need a lucky break to get some coverage at all.

We learned that game development is a rabbit hole with lots of twists and turns, and that the only way to get to the end is by diving in it head first. If we can keep our current momentum going, our studio might have a bright future yet!

Mayan Death Robots is currently in public beta. Sign up on our website <http://www.mayandeathrobots.com> to receive an immediate download link for the latest version. ❄





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A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

LittleBigPlanet 3

When *LittleBigPlanet 2* was released in 2011, my studio, Sumo Digital, was able to expand on this game by developing the “cross-controller pack” bonus content which was released in 2012. Soon after, Sony announced that *LittleBigPlanet 3* would begin development for the PS4 with the goal of being released in November of 2014. Moreover, Sony asked us if we would be interested in developing this installment of the franchise from the ground up. This not only provided us with an amazing opportunity, it also allowed us to gain a great insight into game development that I wanted to share with others in the industry.



Crafting the Characters

A large aspect of the *LittleBigPlanet* franchise's appeal is Sackboy and the other characters in the series. When we started working on *LBP3*, we knew that characters, both old and new, needed to look and feel handcrafted, and we wanted them to be able to sit side-by-side with Sackboy as part of one Sack Family.

Knowing that we wanted to add new playable characters to the game, we looked at the NPCs in the main story arc: OddSock was a wolf cub called “Rusk,” Toggle started off as a Rock Troll with a weak bladder, etc. As the story changed and the gameplay evolved, we had more and more discussions with Sony regarding the potential for making the characters playable.

Once we made the decision to make them playable we developed simple gameplay prototypes to get a feel for how the characters would control and interact with the world. As physical interactions are at the heart of *LBP*, we focused our efforts on developing new and exciting ways for the player to interact with this tactile toy box. Toggle is a great

case in point: His weight-changing abilities are great for lots of cool interactions such as sinking to the bottom of a lagoon as Big Toggle and then transforming into Tiny Toggle to propel himself up to the surface at dizzying speeds.

Customization plays a huge part in the *LittleBigPlanet* series and our new characters are no exception. Sackboy has always been a blank canvas which players can tailor and customize to their heart's content. When creating the new characters we wanted them to have the same simple yet charming appearance and give players the opportunity to personalize them and make them their own.

Another character that is new to this series is Newton. With Stephen Fry being a consistent voice within *LBP*, we wanted Newton—the game's villain—to have an equally impressive vocal talent behind him. Consequently, we wrote Newton with Hugh Laurie in mind. We were exceptionally pleased, not only that Laurie signed on for this but that he added so much to it and really brought Newton to life. With the narrator and main baddie in place, the rest started to make sense quite rapidly.





by Ned Waterhouse;
Game Designer, Sumo Digital;
Sheffield, UK



LittleBigPlanet 3

Handcrafted with a Polished Finish— The Look of *LBP3*

One of the reasons why *LittleBigPlanet* is able to differentiate itself from other games is its unique look. We wanted to continue this by making sure that each of the levels in *LBP3* had a distinctive visual theme. In creating these themes we drew inspiration not so much from stories but from cultural references. The *LBP3* adventure draws inspiration from a wide variety of sources—from quintessential English country gardens to 1950s Americana to Byzantine Russia.

To build these levels, the design team will think in terms of lowest common denominator—choosing the objects and textures that really define each theme. Specifically, they consider an overall prop but immediately think of it in terms of its component pieces and how they can be reused as other things. It's a cornerstone of the franchise to employ "found objects" as game props whenever possible—for a sense of scale and for that ramshackle charm that is so important to *LBP*. The team thinks along these lines whenever they come up with new environments, motifs, and props.

LBP3 is also a very tactile game both in the physical nature of the player's interactions with the world and the look and feel of its environments. Detailed, tangible materials such as cloth, stitched fabric, sponge, and cardboard are used to create this handcrafted aesthetic. When creating the palette of materials for a level we want players to be able to imagine running their hands over the scene and feeling the wealth of variety in the textures.



Sackboy



Swoop

Famed for his dare-devil acrobatics and frequent dalliances with death, Swoop is Bunkum's most esteemed pilot. In his heyday he was often seen hovering amongst the clouds before tucking in his wings and barrel-rolling into a steep dive, hurtling through the blue with expert precision. But his tricks don't stop there—he can lift heavy objects and even some Sack-folk with the strength of his powerful talons.

Toggle



Toggle is the biggest and smallest of the new *LittleBigPlanet* characters. One minute he's a hefty, doddering oaf and then—puff—at the touch of a button, he's a nimble little scamp, darting this way and that, like a sprat in a puddle. In big-form he can smash through stuff, weigh things down and sink like a lost shoe to the bottom of deep oceans. Sadly Big Toggle is a bit out of shape—if you want to move at speed you'll need to change into Little Toggle, who gads about like a flea on steroids. He can also sneak between small gaps, skip across water and get blown skyward by gusts of wind. Toggle is the ultimate one-man team!



OddSock

OddSock is built for speed. She's an agile, athletic hero; wide chasms are bound, walls scaled and slippery slopes slid down—all without dropping stride.



LittleBigPlanet 3



Newton

The main antagonist in *LittleBigPlanet 3*



Pinky

Curator of Bunkum Lagoon

Papal Mache

Curator of the Ziggurat



Determining the Design and Gameplay

Since this was the third installment in the series on home consoles, there were already established conventions for many of the controls. We tried to keep these as consistent as possible so as not to confuse fans of the franchise. We've added a couple of new features, which required new button mappings, but on the whole we kept things as they were.

The DualShock 4 does have a couple of new inputs, which we were keen to take advantage of. The first was the Touch Pad, which we used to add touch controls to Create Mode. Using Touch Create you can place, rotate, and scale objects. This introduces a really nice tactile interaction to the creative process.

The second was the SHARE button, which gives players the ability to capture screenshots and videos as well as broadcast their gameplay live. In *LittleBigPlanet 3*, screenshots can be stamped as stickers to decorate Sackboy's world and shared with the community through the site LBP.me. Creators can also capture video footage of their levels and use it to create promotional trailers to show off their creations. Players can view trailers when browsing the UGC catalogue both in game on PS4 and online through LBP.me.

Another new tool that we added was the Interactive Live Stream Sensor. This clever little device enables Creators to build experiences which responds to commands from a Live Stream audience. We're really looking forward to seeing all the interesting ways that the community makes use of this.

In addition to the interface, we wanted to make sure the game had the right level of difficulty. Doing this required repeated play, refinement, user-testing, and common sense. Once we establish where the puzzle or motif is occurring, we get a pretty good idea of where to pitch the difficulty. That said, it normally takes someone more removed from the project than the creator of a specific scene to be able to tell clearly—the closer a person is to a piece of design, the harder it is to see it through a novice's eyes.



Marlon Random

Curator of Manglewood



Nana Pud

Newton's mother

LittleBigPlanet 3



Mood boards illustrating the inspiration, tone look and feel of three levels in *LittleBigPlanet 3*.

Learning from Users— Players Creating Levels

In addition to all of the features allowing users to share their in-game experiences with others, we have been able to witness just how imaginative our users are when they show off the levels they have built. One of the great things about *LittleBigPlanet 3* is that the Create tools are designed to be modular and have multiple applications. This means that there are always opportunities for them to be combined in different ways to create experiences and behaviors for which they were never originally intended.

We've seen a lot of community creations which have taken advantage of the new depth in the environment. These include a Rez-style tunnel shooter which hurtles into the screen and several top-down platformers which completely flip the player's perspective of the game world. It's great to see the community experimenting with the tools to create new and surprising gameplay experiences.

Looking Back and Final Thoughts

Overall, designing *LittleBigPlanet 3* has been a unique experience. The Create tools which are shipped with the game are the same tools which are used to create the game's adventure mode. So whenever we added or changed a feature we needed to very carefully consider the implications for Create. This issue was even more significant because the game had to be backwards compatible with all of the nine million community levels already published for *LBP1* and *LBP2*.

We also had to learn not to be too precious about the features and content we created. In order to develop the highest quality product we had to be quite brutal when it came to deciding what we kept and what we cut. Over the course of development there were several levels and features which were dropped either because we didn't have the time to refine them or because they just weren't up to the high standards we had set ourselves. Whilst sometimes painful, this approach resulted in an ambitious, high quality game of which we are very proud. ✨



Swoop by Art-in-Heart:
A fantastic handmade model of Swoop.



LittleBigPlanet 3 Family by Bat19Planet:
This image showing the full cast of playable characters was one of the first pieces of fan art we received after the game was announced at E3 2014.

Studio Spotlight

Vizor Interactive

YEAR FOUNDED: 2007

URL: www.vizor-interactive.com

PROMINENT GAMES: *Klondike*, *Zombie Island*, *Loyalty*

HQ: Minsk, Belarus

EMPLOYEES: 80



co-founder
Sergey Brui



The story of Minsk-based Vizor Interactive started back in 2003, when people who later shaped the initial team were playing a browser game called *Fight Club*. The team added a little Belarusian flavor to the list of mostly-Russian studios that sprang to life thanks to *Fight Club*.

"It was all like—everyone plays *Fight Club* and then decides to create something similar," says Sergey Brui, the co-founder of Vizor Interactive.

It all started with a half-homemade, online browser game called *Neverlands*. It became pretty popular but a company didn't grow out of it. That was more of a base for the team's further movement. It gave them the understanding that they really wanted to make games. It wasn't until 2007, however, that they finally decided to start a company. At that time they knew nothing about game development, they had no clue about how people make money at it, and they had no experience other than *Neverlands*. The guys weren't aware of any common business models or markets, had neither partners nor connections—all of which turned out to be a huge advantage because they weren't burdened by the biases and preconceptions that often limit those with the benefit of experience and market knowledge.

Committed to the Process and Willing to Learn

In the beginning they weren't able to hire people with previous experience in the industry, so they worked instead with young people who were committed to the creative process and willing to learn—including

those who might not have been accepted by big companies due to lack of specific education. Sergey and his colleagues hired people they believed in and whom their team simply liked. This is how they managed to create the right atmosphere at the office: almost family-like, but in a productive way. The team members supported each other (and made fun of each other), even as each individual strived to grow and find a place in the team. Everyone wanted to contribute, and working together they continued to lift and

The team added a little Belarusian flavor to the list of mostly-Russian studios that sprang to life thanks to *Fight Club*.

push each other to new levels. Eventually their projects improved, and so did their people. "It's like when Baron Munchausen was pulling himself out by his own hair," Brui says. "It might seem funny and impossible, but this is really how we evolved from a company that knew very little to one that knows a lot. We were getting into the same traps again and again, but eventually we found our way. I think choosing the right people is behind our success."

And from that growth comes satisfaction. "I'm happy to be watching Alexei the programmer grow as a person," says Brui. "He's a self-made man—a psychologist who has become a programmer. We also had a mechanic who turned into an art direc-



The Vizor Interactive team likes to play games together.



tor. And policemen—one is a game designer now, the other one became a programmer. He used to work as a criminalist specializing in chemical analysis of tissue. And now this guy is programming *Klondike*.”

These are not unique cases at Vizor. Brui guesses that about 50% of his people started off on a different path in life. They changed it and started doing what they like. “I wouldn’t call this our goal,” he says. “It’s more of a distinctive feature—that the company is not afraid of hiring people like this, with no particular background. If we see the person can do

something, become a good professional and part of the team—welcome!”

Making What Players Want

The Vizor Interactive team members are hardcore players—and their early work reflects that. One early project was a hardcore, post-apocalypse game called *U.N.I.T. Online*. “It didn’t get much appraisal,” says Brui, “but it started bringing money and let us expand the team. And then we decided to move on, to where the money and the majority of players are.”

Which is why Vizor began making social games, including *Zombie Island*, a farm game with more than

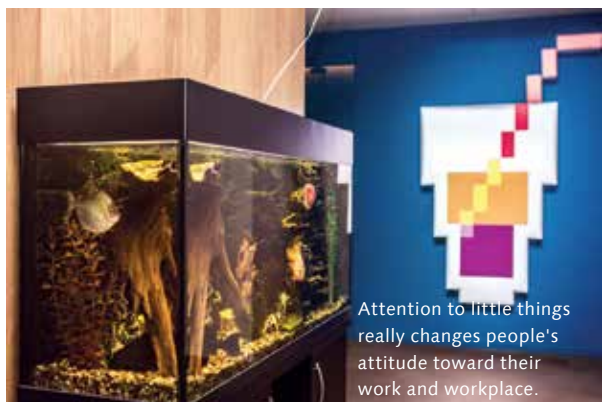
Vizor Interactive



The team is friendly because they hire people they like.



The creative team has space with totally black walls.



Attention to little things really changes people's attitude toward their work and workplace.



50 million players, and *Klondike*, recently recognized as The Best New Game of 2014 on Facebook. It's also why they are now shifting towards mobile.

"Yes, we make farm games," Brui explains, "even though this is not what we like as players. But we understand that these games are what our team is able to create, because we have people with all of the necessary skills. We are not afraid of making games in genres the market is over-flooded with—because even when a certain type of game is losing popularity, it still has devoted fans who are hungry for a new level of desired content."

Maintaining Team Spirit

Since the very beginning, Vizion Interactive has been committed to keeping things fun for the team, so they take time not just to make games but to play them as well. At first there was *Counter Strike*, and every Thursday the whole office split into two teams to compete. Then there was the *Starcraft* era, and after that *Starcraft 2*. At some point some switched to sports simulators and fighting games for consoles, like *Soulcalibur*, *Mortal Kombat*, *FIFA*, *NHL*, and *UFC*. Other people started playing *Company of Heroes* and other strategy games. Generally speaking, they're always playing something with each other.

It was easier to keep the fun going in the early days. Sergey and his business partner Anton were



to communicate. "We care about teambuilding a lot because the main thing for people is to motivate each other and push towards worthy ideas," Brui explains. Recently the whole team went to Turkey for four days to celebrate the seventh birthday of the company.

The founders of Vizion Interactive wanted an office in which people would be excited to come to work on Monday.

"We are not afraid of making games in genres the market is over-flooded with—because even when a certain type of game is losing popularity, it still has devoted fans who are hungry for a new level of desired content."

23 years old when they were starting their company. By the time the team expanded to about 15 people, the founders (by then 25) still were the oldest ones. Now, however, team members have grown up and their priorities have shifted to families, relationships, kids. And they can't gather every week to play *Counter Strike* and drink beer anymore.

But they've found a solution. Now that the team has grown to over 80 people, the company emphasizes team retreats to ensure that people continue

The work environment remains a big priority. Seven years ago, when the company was founded, their first office was in a basement in the suburbs, but since then the company has grown to more than 80 people and upgraded to a cool space in the center of Minsk. "If you're spending eight to 10 hours at work, it becomes like home," Brui says, and his colleagues agree. He admits he doesn't really understand people who save up on where they spend their time. If there's comfort in the

Vizor Interactive



The company strives to help people in both their professional and personal lives.



Vizor Interactive managed to create a home-like atmosphere without compromising the work.

smallest details, people have a different attitude toward their work.

Post-Soviet Reality

Business conditions in the post-Soviet era make it difficult to build a company exactly the way you might want it. "Someone tries to create a perfect company, their own Valve, but this is impossible in our environment," Brui says. "But what we can do is build a company where people like each other." To achieve that standard, Vizor Interactive has established an ideal for new hires to help them determine whether or not a person is a good fit for them. If a person is an awesome professional, but the team feels they won't be able to work well with them, that

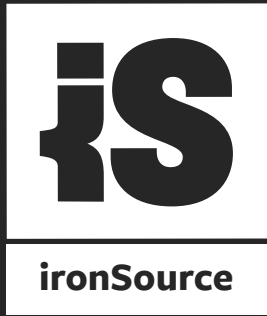
person won't get the job. Vizor's co-founder admits they've rejected many capable people for this reason. Even so, they have been successful enough in their hiring practices that the company has had no failed projects.

That success is also due to a commitment to making games slowly. Vizor isn't into riding emerging trends. Instead, they prepare methodically and cultivate a proper development base to be sure to make high-quality products. They've always chosen difficult niches and filled them with fully ready products.

Vizor Interactive is committed to keeping things fun for the team, so they take time not just to make games but to play them as well.

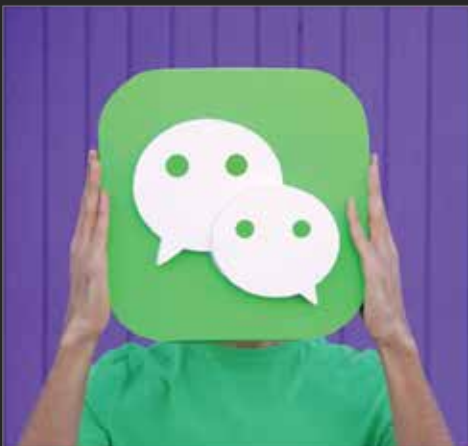
For example, Vizor launched a social farm game—*Zombie Island*—right about the time (2011) that everyone else had quit making farm games. *The Happy Farmer*—a popular social farm game in the Russian vk.com network—was already dying at that time, and people at conferences were talking about how sorry they were for those starting to make farms. At first the Vizor guys felt insecure, but then they realized that they had produced a prettier, more playable product, with better graphics, more content and fewer bugs. And the market loved it. Likewise, their newest creation, *Loyalty*—a social strategy game about knights and princesses—has recently reached the top position in Odnoklassniki's social network.

As Vizor Interactive continues to grow, it remains to be seen whether it can maintain the laidback atmosphere that has been so important to its success. After a lengthy search, they have finally found a human resources director who can help them find new people to match their unique culture and approach. Now the key is to continue to grow, but not so fast that they lose the vibe that makes Vizor a cool place to work. ❄



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Exclusive Interview

What's Your Story

An Interview with **Ichiro Lambe** of Dejobaan Games

Ichiro Lambe is Founder and President of Dejobaan Games. A graduate of Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts, Lambe has been a part of the Boston-area gaming scene since the 1990s. Since forming Dejobaan in 1999, he has worked on dozens of games and spoken about the industry at several events.

Dejobaan describes its latest game, *Elegy for a Dead World*, this way: "Explore dead civilizations, write about what you find, and share your stories with the universe: a game about writing fiction. So no doubt you can understand why we wanted to talk to this guy. Here's what we learned.



What were some games you enjoyed playing in your youth?

ICHIRO LAMBE: The Atari 800 classic, *M.U.L.E.*, will always be near and dear to my heart. Every bit of it—from the title screen music to the colorful animated characters to the well-balanced gameplay—came together to make a perfect experience. It was a game created with love and personality, and it was popular for it. Noah Falstein's *Koronis Rift*, with its first-person view out onto a jagged landscape, was the first game that ever immersed me so fully. And while I adore *Elite*, the original *Starflight* will always stick with me as being my childhood's favorite "You stuck an entire galaxy onto a floppy disk?" game.

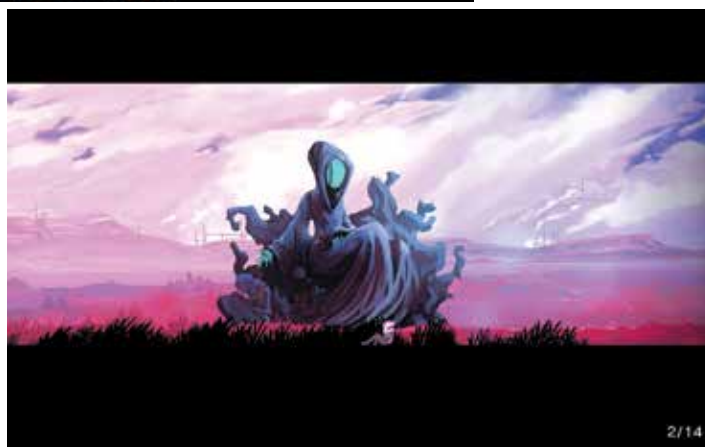
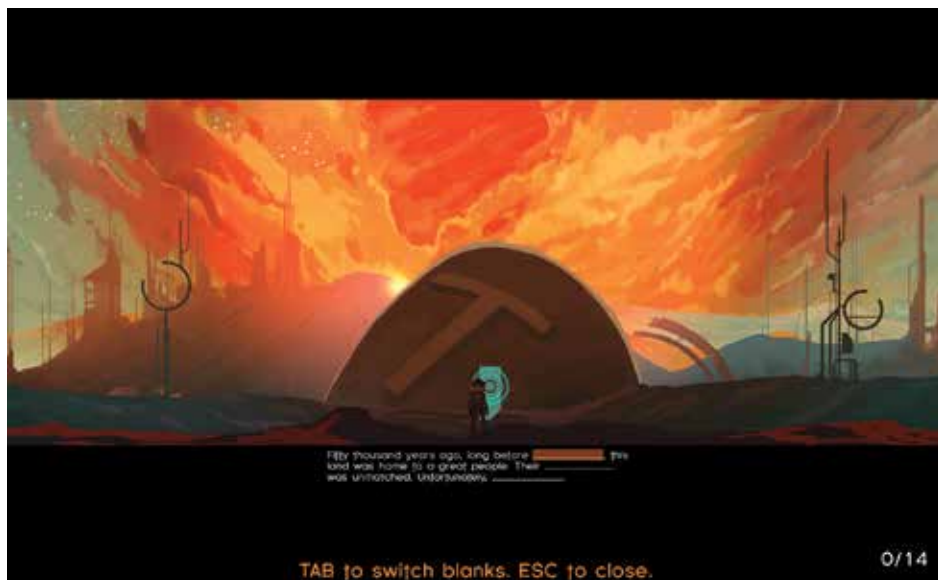
Looking back, when did you know that you wanted to become a video game developer?

In the early '80s, instead of tossing me a softball, my father sat me down in front of a Texas Instruments 99/4A. I keyed in code from magazines and watched them come alive—these were worlds of little organisms going around, doing their own (sometimes, unexpected) things. What I found really fascinating was making minor changes to these systems and watching them evolve (and often break). I felt that I could create an entire universe that was as wondrous and surprising as the real one.

You went to Worcester Polytechnic Institute, the same college as Jon Radoff of Disrupter Beam. Do you feel that WPI is creating a culture that is helping to produce great game designers?

Yes, in fact, a number of WPI graduates have worked on Dejobaan games over the years. I actually met Jon while I was sitting on a rock during fourth-grade recess, ham-fistedly designing a game on paper. We'd both written games before college, so that was something that came naturally during and after our studies at WPI. I graduated before they kicked off their formal Interactive Media and Game Development (IMGD) program, but there were CS faculty there who were passionate, hardcore gamers. It's those hardcore gamer academics who are now driving the IMGD.

I like the idea of running a skunkworks with small, nimble creative teams chewing on fascinating projects, ferreting out the dead-ends, finding the handful of ideas that work, and turning those into marketable products.



Why did you start your own company instead of working for a larger studio?

I like the idea of running a skunkworks with small, nimble creative teams chewing on fascinating projects, ferreting out the dead-ends, finding the handful of ideas that work, and turning those into marketable products. I'm wearing fewer hats these days, but starting a company was the best way I could see to expose myself to all parts of the process, from prototyping to production to market research to PR to business development. It can also be more profitable than working for a larger studio, though that part took a while.

How do you think your studio's portfolio stands apart from the gaming market in general?

Dejobaan's been about diversity of gameplay—AaaaaAaaaaAAAAaAAAAaAAAAA!!! is a super goofy BASE-jumping simulator; *Monster Loves You!* is a Grimm's Fairy Tales take on the virtual pet/visual novel; *Elegy for a Dead World* is a game you play by writing

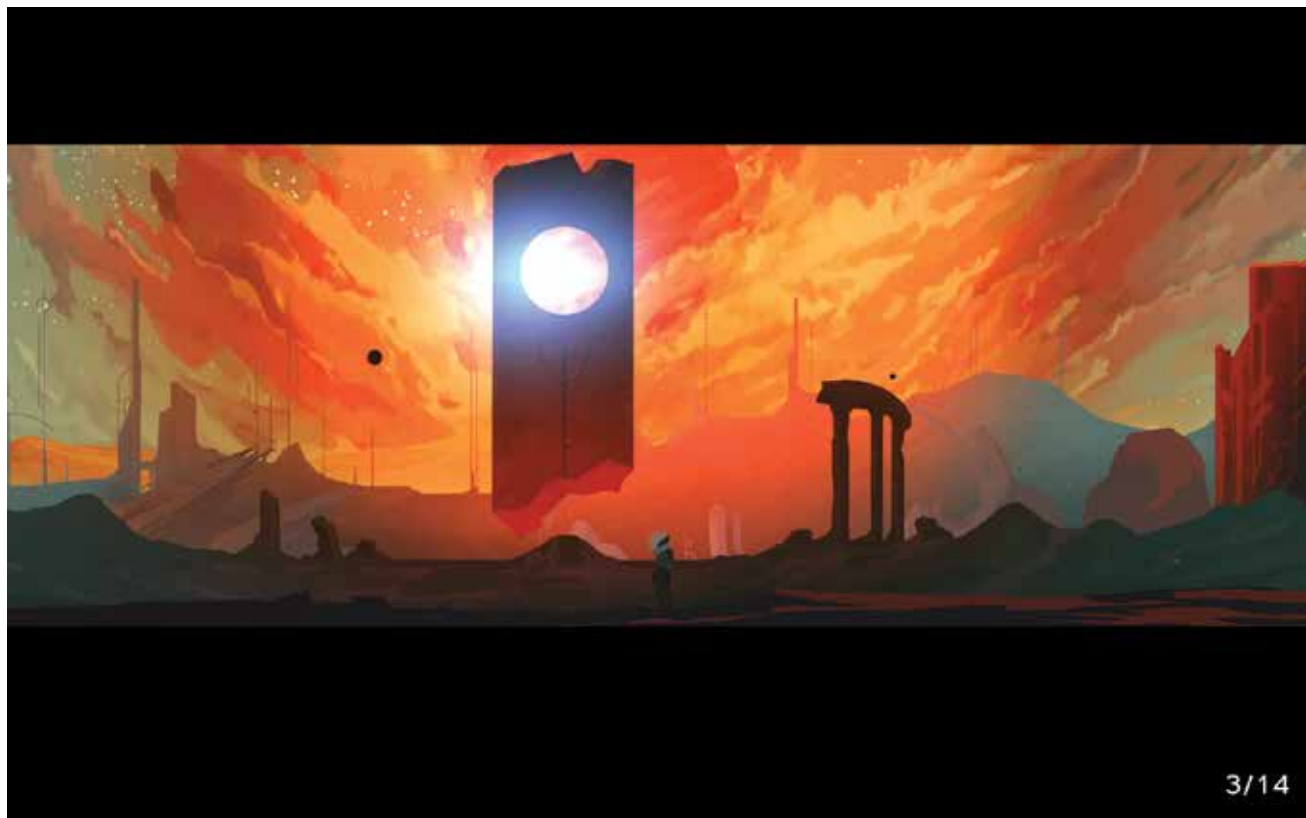
fiction; and so forth. I think one thing we do well is to experiment with different genres, and I'm hoping to head further in that direction in the future.

The studio is named Dejobaan. Why did you select this as a name for your company?

I always tell people that Dejobaan was the Greco-Nordic god of games and entertainment, but the real story is that I founded the company in 1999, when dotcom-era founders were using seed money to go on week-long retreats to Kumbaya their way into sussing out their domain names. I scoffed at that, and just hunkered down to build solid products—a rose by any other name, as they say. "Who cares what I name my company? Let's use a nonsense word." However, years later, we created a



Ichiro Lambe of Dejobaan Games



3/14

When we asked another developer to sit down and interpret the sketches of our first locale (“What happened to the people here?”), his story was completely different from our own, yet it was consistent with what he was seeing. That was fantastic.

BASE-jumping game called *AaaaaAaaaaAAAAaaAAAAaAAAAA!!!*, which got people’s attention, so perhaps a good name can help.

You work in Boston. Do you feel that you are missing out on professional opportunities by not being on the West Coast or near other game development hubs?

Boston’s home to a number of game development studios and though we lack the numbers some

other regions have, it’s been said that we make up for that in cohesiveness of community. The smallness here does mean that we Bostonians need to make an extra effort to connect to the larger development community—so, we travel to conferences, meet with partners electronically, and take advantage of the fact that PAX East lands right here every year.

What was the inspiration for *Elegy for a Dead World*?

Since my Atari 800 days, I’d wanted to create a game where you simply walked to the right, exploring a long-dead, post-apocalyptic world. Last year, we teamed up with fellow Boston studio Popcannibal to do that. When we asked another developer to sit down and interpret the sketches of our first locale (“What happened to the people here?”), his story was completely different from our own, yet it was consistent with what he was seeing. That was fantastic. Within the next week or two, the game turned from one of exploration to storytelling.



Each of the three lost civilizations in Elegy has a distinct look. How was the appearance for each civilization determined?

We based each of the three worlds on British romance-era poems: Percy Shelley's "Ozymandias," John Keats' "When I have fears that I may cease to be," and Byron's "Darkness." For the overall structure of each, co-designer Ziba and I sat down, picked apart its poem, created a story about the downfall of the hypothetical civilization, and sketched that out on paper. So the worlds parallel the poems in many ways: "Ozymandias" takes place in a desert, so the game's first level, Shelley's World, is painted in earthy reds and oranges. We also drew inspiration from outside those: Keats' World, for instance, takes place on a cylindrical mega-structure similar to Arthur C. Clarke's Rama, and we tried to draw from Rama's eerie emptiness.

How did you determine the overall look for the game?

Illustrator Luigi Guatieri explains this best in one of our Kickstarter updates. He drew inspiration from neo-romantic painters such as J.M.W. Turner. Turner's work is lush, often portraying scenes of

nature dwarfing the human subjects, and *Elegy* parallels that—the player's character, the Traveler, is tiny in comparison to vivid hills, sky, and ocean. As in those paintings, the people who inhabited *Elegy's* worlds were insignificant when compared to the environment.



Ichiro Lambe of Dejobaan Games

My favorite meta-story is from a woman who used *Elegy* as a way to write a letter to her recently-deceased grandfather. She tells me that the experience was so powerful that it moved her to tears. As a game developer, I've wanted to create such an emotional experience for decades.

of educators submit requests for keys, proposing use in everywhere from K to 12, university, ESL, and in home schooling. Those keys are really just beginning to go out, so I figure it'll take a while to get real feedback. But the initial results are promising: We're hearing stories about students getting lost in their work and writing for hours. I'm eager to find out what happens when the next semester rolls around, and teachers really start using it in earnest.

Have any of the completed narratives by players stood out to you?

There's some great writing, both from professional writers and non-writers, but my favorite meta-story is from a woman who used *Elegy* as a way to write a letter to her recently-deceased grandfather. She tells me that the experience was so powerful that it moved her to tears. As a game developer, I've wanted to create such an emotional experience for decades.

A feature of this game is that a player can upload a completed narrative to a service that can send them a high-quality, physical copy of their story in *Elegy*. Do you feel that this type of strategy can be used in other games to further generate revenue?

Players are essentially creating their own books, so they can export high-res shots of their works and send them to a print-on-demand service like Lulu or Blurb. Margins are low on that, so while I don't think that's a strong direct source of revenue, it's a great talking point. You can have an actual, physical, glossy coffee table book with gorgeous visuals and your own personal story sitting in your living room. It's a unique connection between the game world and the real world.

As part of the Kickstarter for *Elegy*, you gave a thousand keys to educators. What are some ways you are hoping that educators will use this game?

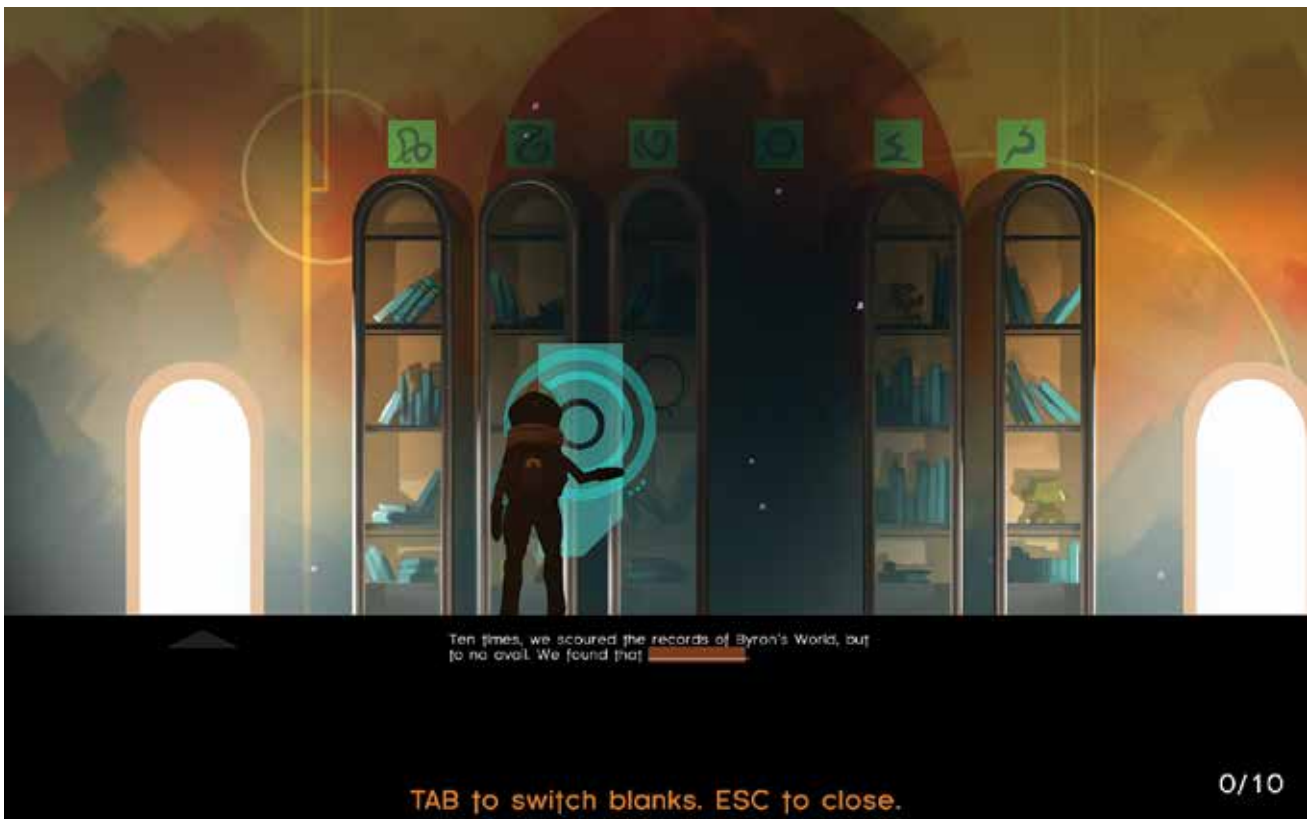
Whenever we show *Elegy* off at conferences and conventions, we've always had educators come up to us and tell us how they'd love to use the game in their classrooms. Since then, we've had hundreds

What are some of the long-term goals for *Elegy*?

Our next big step will be to create an offline mode that doesn't require Steam (which is sometimes a barrier in academic settings). We're also waiting to see what people make of the game, and what they want from it. Are we being too prescriptive in how we have the players write? Or do we want to impose more constraints? Are people mostly focused on writing and sharing, or are they mostly interested in reading what other people create? One thing we did right during development was to gather feedback from players, so we'll do the same thing here.

Beyond *Elegy* for a Dead World, are there other projects you are working on that people can look out for?

Having finished production on *Elegy* and our other 2014 title, *Drunken Robot Pornography*, we're largely in skunkworks mode now. *Elegy*'s taught us that we can be a bit bolder with our designs, so we're working on a few things such as a simulation where you teach the world's first sentient AI about life, morality, and purpose; and a multiplayer online biosphere simulator, where you terraform a planet by seeding it with simple life. It's going to be a fun year. ✱



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Outsmarting the Console

Your Mobile Device's "Senses" Are the Ultimate Trump Card

Each year, the smartphone increases power, not just settling for a supreme computing device (with a stronger CPU or faster internet connection) but also becoming smarter than ever imagined. Smartphones become more intuitive and increasingly mimic human characteristics, including hearing (microphone), speaking (speakers), touch (touchscreen), vision (camera) and orientation (GPS).



Developers use these "smartphone senses" for the continuous innovation of apps such as intuitive keyboards, music recognition, adaptable navigation, etc. In mobile games, the touch, gyro, GPS, and speakers "senses" are already commonly used while hearing and vision senses are quite rare. One of the fastest evolving interfaces on the smartphone is visual capability, which utilizes the camera well beyond taking a panoramic photo or selfie for advanced tasks such as user interfaces, augmented reality, and security (through improvements in facial recognition / iris movement sensing). Additionally, vision will most certainly play a major role in how mobile device's "senses" will trump the console.

The Mobile Device Advantage

When compared to a console, current mobile sensing technologies not only extend well beyond tradi-



tional console functionalities, but they also have a viral aspect that can propel a mobile game straight to international success. While motion-enabled and gesture-control games have long been popularized by the likes of Wii and Kinect, these games and gesture capabilities have been tied to and limited by consoles and hardware/sensors, preventing the combination of two of the hottest trends in gaming: mobile and motion control. Mobile remains unchained from dedicated hardware, uniting countless manufacturers and models through common operating systems (Android, Windows Mobile, iOS). In addition, motion enabled consoles (\$400-\$600 on average) and console games are extremely expensive, with each new game representing an additional add-on cost. Big name developers monopolize the space, making it almost impossible for smaller, independent developers to gain recognition.

On the other side of the coin, the majority of consumers have mobile devices, which places the power in the hands of game developers of all sizes—from an indie developer coding in his garage to mega studios—truly leveling the playing field. Mobile devices¹ also boast a faster refresh cycle than consoles with upgrade options via hardware and software released multiple times a year. Personal consumer electronic devices costs are usually significantly

The majority of consumers have mobile devices, which places the power in the hands of game developers of all sizes—from an indie developer coding in his garage to mega studios—truly leveling the playing field.



less than consoles and serve multiple purposes (phone, Internet, email, social, entertainment, etc.). In fact, earlier this year IDC predicted the average overall selling price for all smartphones will reach \$314 by year end, 6.3% below the \$335 average selling price last year.²

Why Mobile “Senses” Matter

As mobile game developers mirror human senses into new technologies, the mobile gaming experience is significantly enhanced. Take Sega’s *Go Dance*, as an example. The iOS game utilizes Extreme Reality’s motion-capture technology to turn the FaceTime Camera into a motion-sensor that detects players’ movements while they imitate avatars dancing on screen. In this instance, using the vision and speaking senses of the device allows it to analyze the player movements while playing popular music throughout the duration of the game. Another solid example of the evolution of mobile gaming technologies is *Beach Volley Motion Sensing*, which uses touch, and vision capabilities to allow gamers to stand five-to-six feet in front of their devices and performing the volleyball movements they see of on screen

And while Sega *Go Dance* and *Beach Volley Motion Sensing* are just a couple of examples of how mobile gaming technology is transforming our mobile devices to mimic human senses and interaction, one thing is certain: mobile gaming has the computing power to alter the user experience in new and exciting ways, making mobile devices the gaming medium of choice and subsequently impacting the console/hardware business for years to come. ❄

1 <http://techcrunch.com/2014/03/09/console-crisis/>

2 <http://www.computerworld.com/article/2489944/smartphones/smartphone-prices-are-dropping--and-will-continue-to-dip-through--18.html>



Mobile Performance Platform
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Making Mobile Ads Suck Less

Finding a Better Way to Introduce Users to Apps They'll Like



It's been almost seven years since AdMob initially popularized app install ads on iOS. The mobile ads industry has evolved quite a bit since then. We now have targeting that's native to mobile, accurate tracking and attribution, ad exchanges, and a wide range of ad formats. With these developments, advertisers have a lot of flexibility to show the right ad to the user at the right time. However, the experience of app ads has remained largely the same: They still suck.

The User Experience Continues To Suck

Let's look at what happens when a user taps on an ad for a new app. Regardless of whether it's a banner, interstitial, or native unit, the user is sent to the app store and asked to install the app. The data suggest that this isn't a good experience for the end user: Only a low single percentage of all users sent to the app store actually proceed to install.

Why are users tapping on the ad but not following through with the install? It's a combination of a few factors. First, users sometimes tap on ads accidentally, disrupting their experience when they have no intent to learn more about the app being promoted.

Drop-offs also occur simply due to the high friction of the installation process. Installing an app requires a significant time commitment. Before making that commitment, users barely know anything



by David Zhao;
Founder, Voxel;
Palo Alto, CA

The data suggest that when a user taps on an ad for a new app, it isn't a good experience. Only a low single percentage of all users sent to the app store actually proceed to install.

about the app, and only few spend the time to read through the descriptions in the app store. Users then have to wait for the install to complete and then go back to their home screen in order to try the app for the very first time. Today's app install ads put the experience at the very end; and that doesn't help with conversion.

To make things worse, in order to make ads more enticing to click on, advertisers are making ad units visually explode through animation, flashing buttons, and auto-playing videos. Mobile ads today are starting to look similar to the "punch the monkey" flash ads back in the day.

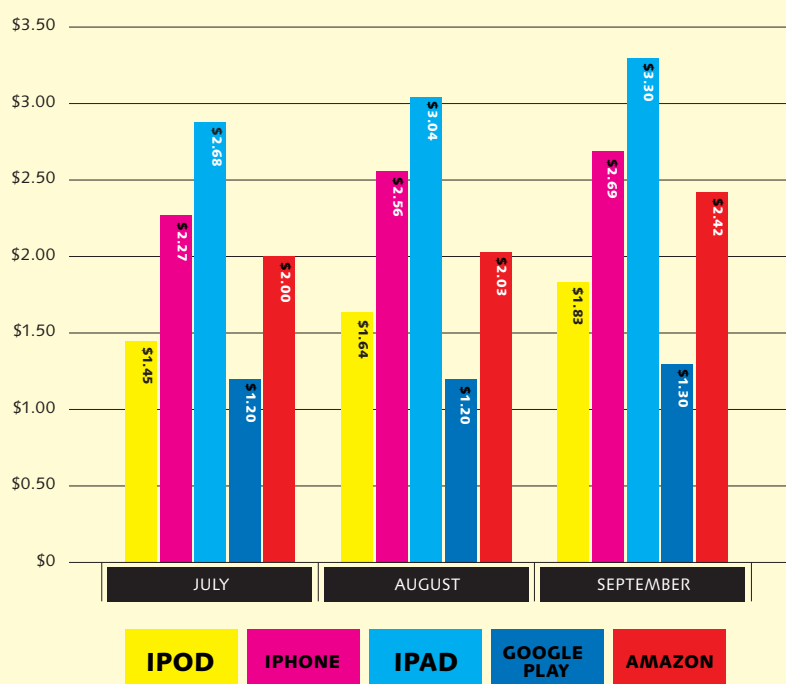
Challenging Environment For Advertisers

As we continue to see an unprecedented demand for mobile users, the cost per install (CPI) of mobile app ads continues to rise. According to Chartboost, CPI on iPhone went up from \$1.62 in September 2014 to \$2.69 in September 2014, a 66% increase year over year. This creates a challenging environment for many advertisers, as the growth in cost of user acquisition outpaces LTV.

The CPI model is flawed for advertisers as they are paying for blind installs instead of engaged users. Since the user has to install an app in order to try it, advertisers are effectively paying for trials. A portion of those trial users will not find the app engaging or simply not a good fit for them. In those cases, the user opens the app no more than once, but it still costs the advertiser the same.

It would be ideal to the advertisers if they could filter out that group of users. Smart advertisers are constantly looking at the quality of users (measured by retention or LTV) coming through each traffic source, and adjusting their budgets according to the ROI of each class of users. Generally speaking, the quality of users improves as more relevant users are delivered.

AVERAGE CPI BY DEVICE, JULY 2014 TO SEPT. 2014

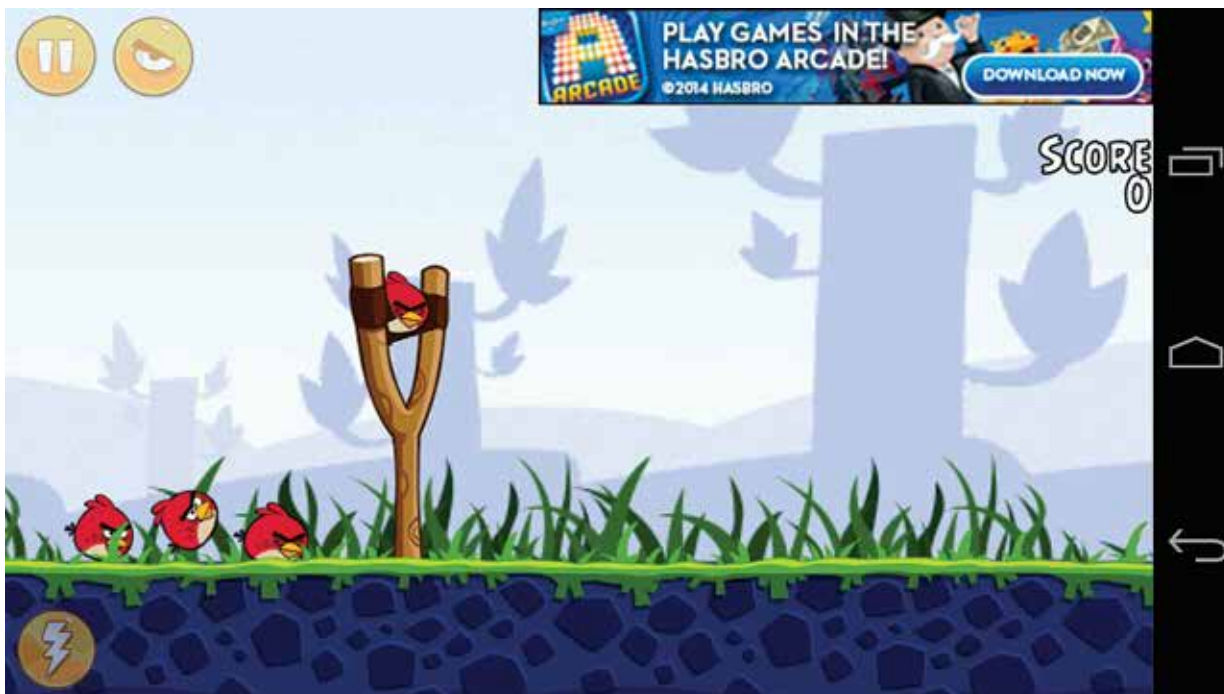


Finding Relevant Users

Advertising is a mutually beneficial thing when done right. It introduces users to new apps that they will find useful or entertaining. The question becomes: How do you ensure that only interested users go through the install process? There are only so many things you can do from a targeting perspective. Since every app is different, it's not possible to know definitively whether the user will like the app purely based on their purchase history or demographics.

However, if users had an accurate picture of what the app does, then they would be able to judge more effectively whether they'll like the app. Unfortunately, the app store is very limited; and most users do not have the patience to read through app store description and screenshots. Companies have tried video trailers for games, which produces better quality users than standard ads. However, advertisers tend to oversell in the game trailers, leaving users underwhelmed when they go through to install the actual game.

We need a better solution.



Making Your App The Ad

There is a better way to show off an app to the end user. Why not simply let users try the app before asking them to install? After all, this is the ideal experience for the end user. It's no different than flipping through a book or test-driving a car before making the purchase decision.

Until recently, app previews were not possible on mobile. Due to the way native apps are designed, the entire binary had to be downloaded onto the device before it could run. For security reasons, distribution of native files is tightly controlled by the OS and requires explicit user consent every step of the way.

With app streaming technology, however, it is now possible to run mobile apps on the cloud and stream them to the end users. This effectively allows users to try out an app without having to install it. Using app streaming, you can turn an existing app into the ad, creating playable ad units. And since a playable ad is essentially the app itself, it requires very little additional creative effort and only minutes to produce.

Playable ads do away with static units and put your app front and center. This benefits users since it gives them an instant preview of the app experience without having to jump through hoops with installation. It's also beneficial for the advertiser because the users who do install will be more interested and engaged.

Due to their low friction for users to try a demo of a game, playable ads are actually more effective than standard ones in raw conversion metrics. This was a surprising find for us when market-testing playable ads. We had suspected that, with more information about the app, users who did not like the demo would not install the app. This part turned out to be true.

However, what we didn't account for was that given a better experience, more users are willing to give an app a chance than they might be if simply redirected to the app store. Overall, we see playable ads convert 1.5 times better than their static counterparts. This means publishers will also see higher eCPMs with playable ads, without increasing the CPI.

Why not simply let users try the app before asking them to install? After all, this is the ideal experience for the end user. It's no different than flipping through a book or test-driving a car before making the purchase decision.

Final Words

Mobile advertising is a highly dynamic industry that's constantly evolving. If Mary Meeker is right, there will continue to be significant growth in front of us as ad spend catches up to consumer attention. As an industry, it's time that we start focusing more on the end user experience. As Google showed, it's possible to create a compelling business while maintaining a high quality user experience. Together with the app developers and ad networks, I'm confident we can create that high quality experience for the end user. ✨



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Playing (Somewhat) by the Book

The Real-time Narrative of Inkle

"It turns out that designing what your business does and what it makes is like a really fun game to play."

After working in the console industry for years, Joseph Humfrey and Jon Ingold found that they were increasingly dissatisfied with the games that they were working on. Deciding to gamble on their ambitions, skills, and talent, Humfrey and Ingold left their jobs in 2011 and founded Inkle Studios in Cambridge. In Humfrey's words: "We couldn't face the console industry any longer, so we left."

Meeting Up

As children of academics, Joseph Humfrey and Jon Ingold became friends while working for Sony Computer Entertainment's European branch in Cambridge. Realizing that the intellectual influence their parents had on them encouraged them to have a cerebral approach to game development, Humfrey and Ingold not only became friends but both found themselves increasingly uninterested in the types of video games that Sony (and other large video game developers) would allow them to make.

They also resisted the inevitable typecasting that comes with working for a large development studio. "Jon would get labeled as a designer and that automatically means that he's expected to build 3D models of levels, but that's not the kind of designer he is," says Humfrey. "I was once pigeonholed as a coder, but at Inkle I do all the art direction and I also like to dabble in design."

"[Large studios] force you to specialize," Ingold adds. "You may have a very niche role and you have to do that exclusively. I think that's what drives away talented people, because they want breadth, they want change, they want variety." Ingold acknowledges that ironically that quest for variety can actually undermine effective game development. "You can't make a good game with people who are butterfly-flying from one role to another," he says.

Humfrey and Ingold did find their console experience to be an important part of their professional growth. "Learning the discipline of making games is actually incredibly useful in understanding the roles of programmers, artists, designers, animators," says Humfrey. "Making these pieces fit together in a project is kind of a massive logistical and engineering feat, and once you learn what works and what doesn't work in the industry it's incredibly valuable experience."

Venturing Out

Though Humfrey and Ingold are good friends, they had different views on starting their own studio. For Humfrey, starting his own business was something he had long desired to do. "I've wanted to start my own company for quite a long time," Humfrey says. "I had a friend who started a business, and something clicked in my head—that it's not something that you dream about but a tangible reality that you can do. It was just a matter of having the right idea and right team."

Ingold, on the other hand, had no such desire. "I had no interest in running a business at all," he explains, "but I think for me it was timing. On the one hand, I was starting to feel much more competent as a designer. I had ideas that were broad and wanted to try new things. At the time, at Sony we were working on an interesting project that got disemboweled by the management, marketing, and development process. It was a great concept and it went horribly wrong. Having those things happen to me made it clear that I was never going to be able to do anything interesting in the console industry. It was a great experience, it was formative, but it wasn't actually going to be fulfilling—it couldn't be. I didn't want to found a company, but it seemed like the best way to get to do what I wanted to do."

Adds Humfrey: “The thing I really like about this is that you get to be involved in all aspects of it. It turns out that designing what your business does and what it makes is like a really fun game to play.”

At first, the pair considered focusing their efforts on interactive stories—with lots of branches and lots of choices that ultimately would wrap back into the flow of the narrative. Given that conceptual structure, Ingold and Humfrey wanted the company’s name to reflect a weaving metaphor—“this idea of threads that branch and diverge but that go in the same direction.”

Two-word mash-ups led nowhere (StoryWeave? LoomTale?). So finally they turned to Ingold’s mother-in-law for help. “She is, in fact, a weaver,” says Ingold, “and she mentioned the word ‘inkle’—a type of loom that makes very narrowly woven belts. It’s in dictionary, but also obscure.” Easy to brand, in other words.

They also hoped to distinguish themselves by going after an unusual market: interactive novels designed for readers rather than gamers—people who might be interested in having a different sort of tech-enabled reading experience. Their first app was *Frankenstein*. Written by Dave Morris—a British author of gaming guides, as well as computer and role-playing games—*Frankenstein* was an app published by Profile Books that turned the classic novel into an interactive experience. “It was a dialogue between the player and Victor Frankenstein,” says Ingold, “where you choose what to say and develop a relationship with him.”

“I had a friend who started a business, and something clicked in my head—that it’s not something that you dream about but a tangible reality that you can do. It was just a matter of having the right idea and right team.”

Unfortunately, it turned out that there weren’t nearly enough people interested in a tech-enabled reading. “Our experience taught us that there wasn’t much of a market in the literature space,” Ingold says. “People who like books don’t really want to mess with them, and people who don’t like books won’t like interactive books.”

Repositioning

Their experience with *Frankenstein* pushed Inkle back into the world of game development even though they still maintained a strong literary bent. “By that time we had already quite a lot of success in terms of our design and the quality of the visuals and the interactions,” says Ingold. “Our first game was basically a game full of words, text, and writing. It was a written game.”



Inkle Studios
Cambridge, UK



That style seems to suit them. Says Ingold: “There are a few people doing similar things, but we are fairly unique so we don’t have to differentiate ourselves. We’re not making endless runners, we’re not making platformers. We found a niche.”

“I thought I was getting tired of games and I wanted to do something a little bit different by adding interactivity to novels,” Humfrey adds, “but it turns out I’m still fascinating by video games as a medium even if 90% of games, when I look at them, I don’t like them very much.” He has found that “using the vocabulary and the systems that video games provide to create new experiences is incredibly exciting.”

“People talk about video games and what they often mean are shooters, runners, platformers, and I’m not interested in that,” Ingold says. “But video games are made from systems for delivering content, and I’m really interested in systems for delivering content. And the fact that those systems can make shooters, yeah, okay, but they can make a ton of other things. What is interesting is that if people stop thinking of games and start thinking of systems you can actually go to hundreds and thousands of different places, and the little niche of normal games begins to look random. Like, why are we still making shooters?”



Turning to *Sorcery!*

Humfrey and Ingold were cautious when they first started out. Unlike other indie startups, which often launch with multi-year games, Inkle's first project was *Frankenstein*. It paid them a small amount of money upfront with a royalty cut on the backend. More importantly, it was a quick project that could highlight the quality of their work.

The success of *Frankenstein* allowed them to get other contract work which they could then use to build their portfolio while paying their bills—without dipping into their personal savings (as so many startups are forced to do). As they built up their reputation, Humfrey and Ingold earned the contract for adapting Steve Jackson's classic adventure gamebook series *Sorcery!* into a digital gaming experience. Having a large body of creative work to draw from was a huge advantage, of course, but at the same time the team faced a daunting task: to take material and artwork that was rooted in the '80s and make it fresh and relevant to a broad base of potential new users—"a game that wasn't just built for the nostalgic fans," in Humfrey's words. They wanted to capture the feel of the books while bringing them into the 21st century.

They ended up using *Sorcery!*'s inherent interactivity to maximum advantage in their quest to engage and entertain. "One thing I do delight in," explains Humfrey, "is that in the books there are often little situations or traps that are set up so there is a wrong thing to do and a right thing to do. And sometimes when we adapt them, we turn them around, so that people who remember what happened in the original

book remember what they are supposed to do and end up getting kicked in the head."

Heading Around the World

In December, 2014, Inkle released its latest game, *80 Days*, a modernization of Jules Verne's classic 1873 novel *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Playing as Phileas Fogg's valet, Passepartout, the game's world is built upon a half-million-word script by Meg Jayanth. When Inkle created a modern version for *Sorcery!*, they took pride in expanding upon the source material and even changing parts of it to instill in players that this game is something new. The studio took a similar approach with *80 Days*.

"We wanted to stay true to the spirit of the book," Ingold says, "but one of our goals was that we didn't want to replicate the book. We had to expand it. We wanted to go steampunk." The team wanted the game "to have that spirit of wonder, adventure, and a little bit of proper science" without, as Ingold puts it, "slavishly replicating" the book.

This creative license may make it hard for some to properly label *80 Days*. The gameplay lends itself to comparisons with the choose-your-own-adventure novels, but it's an incomplete comparison. "You expect as a reader to know how a book works," says Humfrey, "and it is quite hard to break that assumption. When you play with our games you won't have a clue how it works or how it fits together. You are supposed to get lost in the narrative and cope."

Humfrey explains further: "The only plot points that player *has* to go through are the beginning and the end—so, London." Beyond that, it's pretty much up to you. Say, for example, you are given the option of riding a train. In a typical choose-your-adventure game, if you decide not to ride the train the game will either produce a prompt or offer a scenario that pushes you onto the train anyway. Not so in *80 Days*. "If you say 'no thanks' to the train, you don't go on the train and you have to go somewhere else. Players often go into the game expecting there to be boundaries to make sure that they do the right thing. Every choice is a real choice. If you jump off a train it will go on without you."

So you can understand why Inkle's team prefers the term "real-time narrative" to describe *80 Days* and the similar games they have made. It is as if they allow the player license to rewrite the story's narrative. With Inkle's games, "you are in the room with the person telling you the story—right here, right now." And as a consequence, each player has the option of telling entirely a different story based on their own experiences in the game.

Originally, Inkle wanted to approach the visuals for *80 Days* in a style that mirrored typical steampunk aesthetics. "We started off with the standard brass cogs, steam, grime," Humfrey says, "but at some point we felt a bit restless and wanted to see

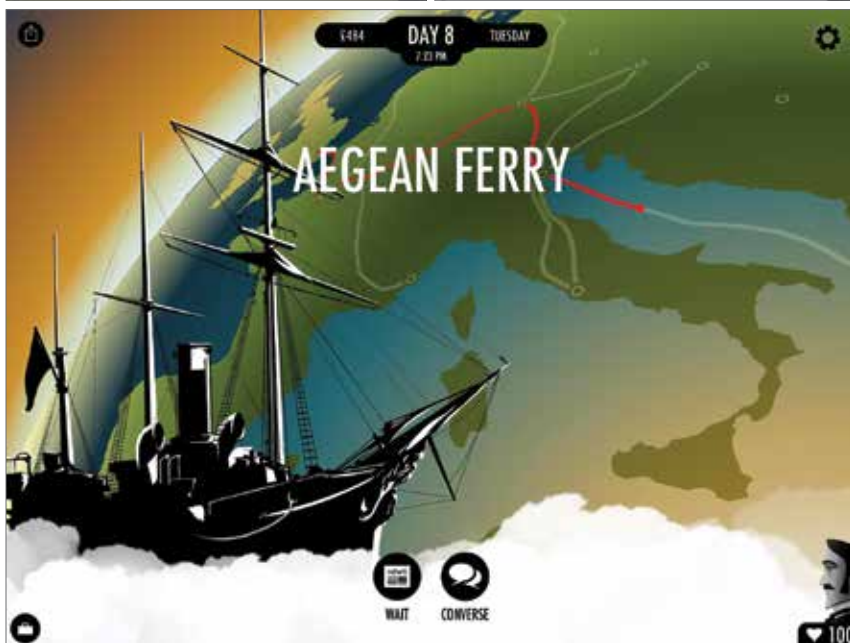
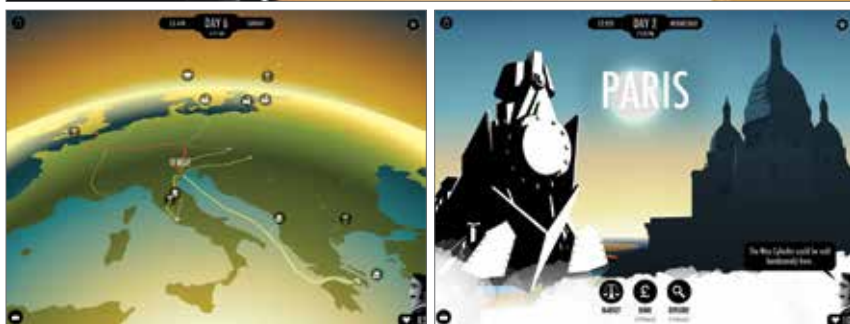
"Using the vocabulary and the systems that video games provide to create new experiences is incredibly exciting."

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Ingold and Humfrey would love for *80 Days* to win an award—any award—even if it's just for Best Game with a Number in the Title.

if there was something different we could create.” Ultimately this restlessness led to Humfrey to art deco travel posters of the 1920s which lend the game a nostalgic yet vibrant sense of travel—a modern look that still seems true to the late 19th century.

The minimalist aspect of the art style that they went for in *80 Days* also shaped the game’s user interface. “If you take a screenshot of your game showing the main game UI, then everything in that shot should communicate to the player what this game is about,” Ingold says. “So we have a clock front and center, we have money, we have Phileas Fogg and his health, his suitcase, and the globe. That is the UI and that is the story of the game: You’ve got limited stuff, you’re against the clock, and you’re going.”

Overall, the initial feedback on *80 Days* has been positive—and encouraging. “There is a large and increasing market for smaller games,” Ingold says, “so you don’t need to compete against larger games if you’re making an experience that is significantly different from established companies.” Humfrey agrees.

“While you can’t say that if you build it they will come,” he says, “you can say that if you build something amazing and you really put your heart and soul into it and make sure that it is generally playable, then they might come.”

Moving Forward

Over the years, Ingold and Humfrey have tried to retain the ability to think like players even as their work compels them to think like developers. That orientation has pushed the studio to develop interfaces that have only the bare essentials. “The inclination is to put a button on the screen for every single function,” Ingold says, “but as a player that is a terrible idea because you want one button which is the thing you should do next.”

In addition, they strive to take advantage of the lessons they learned working on large-scale console projects even though their indie projects lack both the scale and budgets of their previous work. “As an indie studio quite often what you’re doing is approximating a real production process,” says Ingold. “It’s a bit like making a short film. You have one guy who does the lighting, and the lighting he does is not the lighting you get on a full-scale feature film, but it is a small-scale approximation of the lighting you’d get.” He adds: “It’s really helpful to understand the scope and processes of a project that’s bigger than the project we’re working on because then you have a frame to work with.”

As for the future, Ingold and Humfrey would love for *80 Days* to win an award—any award—even if it’s just for Best Game with a Number in the Title. In the meantime, they are working on *Sorcery 3*—and remaining a studio that delivers great narratives that stand out from the rest. ❄

CROSS PLATFORM CASUAL GAMES



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Just Your Basic Suburban Octopus

Kevin Geisler, Young Horses, and the Curious Case of Octodad

How passionate is Kevin Geisler about interactive media? Put it this way: He started his first digital media business before finishing high school. From there a career in the videogame industry was a foregone conclusion. While working towards a degree in Game Development at DePaul University, Geisler developed a game called *OctoDad* which went on to be selected as an Independent Games Festival Student Showcase winner. After graduating from DePaul, Geisler went to work for Vicarious Visions and Rocket Gaming Systems before rejoining the team behind *OctoDad* at Young Horses.

So we just had to ask....

What was the inspiration for *Octodad* and *Octodad: Dadliest Catch*? Specifically, which came first: the gameplay or the character?

They were both pitched together as one idea. Originally, it was an octopus driving a robotic human suit trying to fool people, but the idea eventually snowballed into just having him be in a suit and having a normal human wife and kids. The gameplay was inspired by *Jurassic Park: Trespasser*, which attempted to have realistic physics for controls—but it inadvertently became humorous to watch how unrealistic it was.

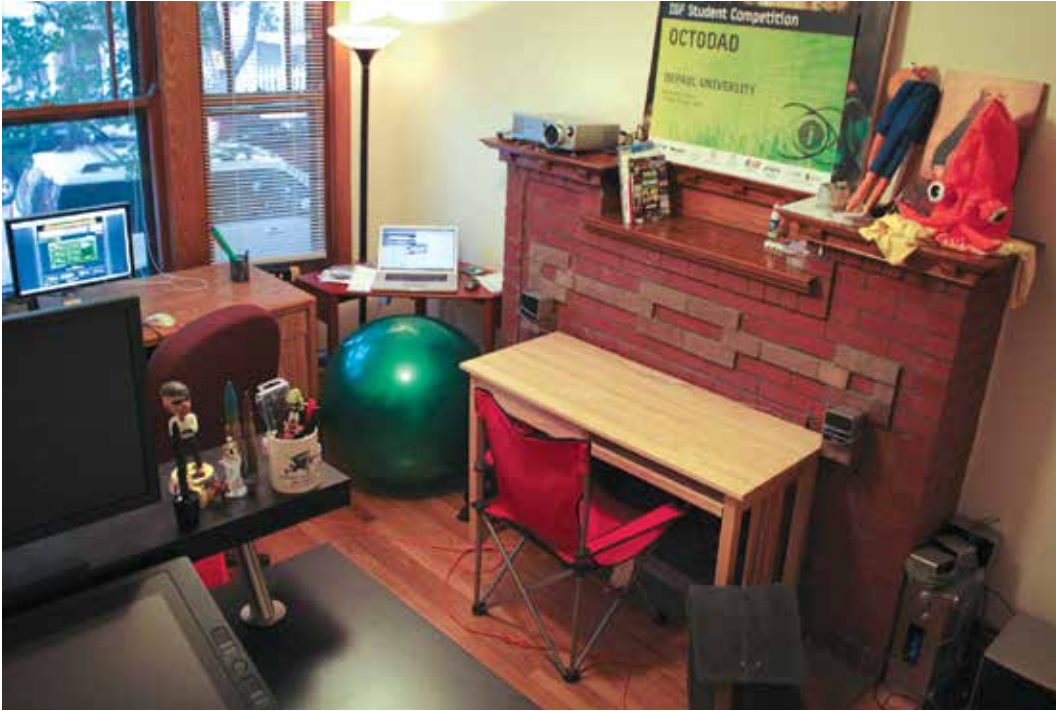
The narrative of the game is that *Octodad* is trying to hide his true identity while being part of a suburban family. How did this idea develop?

We had some inspiration from movies like *Being John Malkovich* and *Weekend at Bernie's*, but otherwise we've all been heavily influenced by the cartoons and sitcoms we grew up on. Particularly, we noticed early on that we shared a lot in common with *Ani-maniac's* "Chicken Boo" sketch.

To help fund *Octodad: Dadliest Catch*, your studio turned to Kickstarter. What were some of challenges your group encountered when running this Kickstarter campaign?

We underestimated the time involved in delivering the physical goods. We spent countless hours packing and shipping t-shirts and even had one person devote quite a few weeks on hand-sewing individual plush dolls. Still, Kickstarter was a great motivator for us in that there was really no backing down after that point.





Young Horses
Chicago, IL

Your studio was one of the first to have a game on Steam Greenlight. How has that worked out?

It was very valuable for us to be posted on Greenlight as soon as it launched. We had a lot of eyeballs early on that helped propel us towards the top. Within a few weeks of posting, we also had a popular “Let’s Play” with Totalbiscuit that brought a lot of attention to our Greenlight page and helped get us through by the second batch of Greenlit games. Steam users in general have been very good about providing feedback and sending bug reports. We’ve done a lot since release to incorporate changes and have been surprised at the willingness of people to help us out.



Octodad has gained a global audience. What are some of the challenges involved in preparing the game for multiple languages?

For official languages we went through Local Heroes—who have been phenomenal. Our game is full of puns, so we have appreciated their ability to come

up with similar wordplay (like “Soda City” becoming “Refresópolis” in Spanish). One of the things we’ve learned since launching is how important it is to have the localizations done at launch. We have added additional languages throughout the year, but a large opportunity was missed by not having them at launch.

We’ve all been heavily influenced by the cartoons and sitcoms we grew up on. Particularly, we noticed early on that we shared a lot in common with *Animaniac’s* “Chicken Boo” sketch.

Octodad: Dadliest Catch is available for PC, Mac, Linux, PS4, and Steam. What were some challenges involved in adapting this game for these platforms?

For the most part, the middleware we used (Irrlicht/PhysX/FMOD) was created to support these systems out of the box. PS4 required a bit of a learning curve, but we were surprised that it only took one of us a month to get it to a playable state so that we would have a demo to show at E3. We originally focused on a mouse-based control scheme, but after several



iterations we ended up preferring a controller-based scheme.

On this note, are there any plans to adapt the game for mobile devices or social media platforms?

We hope to bring Octodad to mobile devices. Our engine can run on iOS and Android, but we have design considerations to think about for touch controls and tech considerations regarding which devices to support. We also have a lot to think about regarding the pricing model, since a \$15 game is a tough sell to that market. I'm not sure our focus on telling a story works well with a free-mium model.

Steam users in general have been very good about providing feedback and sending bug reports. We've done a lot since release to incorporate changes and have been surprised at the willingness of people to help us out.

Young Horses has produced some amazing merchandise for Octodad. What steps do you take to make sure that each piece of merchandise best represents the brand?

In general, different companies have approached us about doing merchandise. For items like the plush Octodad from Fangamer, we sent them a sketch of what we were thinking, and then they managed to turn it into a reality. We've also worked with places like The Yetee, where they will send us design concepts for t-shirts and other merchandise. We will generally approve them without having to ask for many changes since they have a lot of talented people working with them.

Are you at all surprised by the number of fans who want to know how Octodad's human children came about?

Nope! We have our own ideas about their origin, but we find it much more fun keeping it a mystery.

Many indie studios end up solely tied to one gaming property. Is Young Horses currently working on any games unrelated to Octodad?

We just recently started working on our next game, which will not be related to *Octodad*. It's a pretty different game, but I think when people see it, they won't necessarily be surprised that it came from us. We plan to include a lot of the humor and charm that people have found endearing with *Octodad*. ✨



Games as Therapy

Stroke Survivors Get Help from *Recovery Rapids*

Recovery Rapids uses motion-sensor gaming systems to boost the mobility of stroke victims and others with motion-related disabilities.

According to the American Stroke Association, every 40 seconds someone in the United States suffers a stroke—often resulting in long-term physical debilitation. Add to those numbers thousands more who suffer from brain injuries, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, and other neurological disorders and you find more than two million people who have difficulty moving the arm and hand on one side of their body.

In an effort to create a less expensive alternative to physical therapy for such people, Games That Move You set out to create video games that can help. Their first game—*Recovery Rapids*—uses motion-sensor gaming systems to boost the mobility of stroke victims and others with motion-related disabilities.

Getting Started

According to Dr. Roger Crawfis—a member of the Department of Computer Science and Engineering at Ohio State and Chief Technology Officer of Games That Move You—because of the cost of hand/arm

rehabilitation (roughly \$9,000) and the lack of properly-trained providers, fewer than 1% of people receive the quality motor therapy they really need. Add to that the hidden costs associated with transportation and family assistance and you can understand why victims have such a hard time getting consistent and effective rehabilitation therapy.

To begin addressing that issue, Crawfis and his team turned to members of the disabled community from the start. So it was that they found themselves collaborating with many older people who had not typically played a lot of video games. Game mechanics had to be intuitive, consistent with familiar, real-life activities.

Similar to games like *Just Dance* and other rhythm games that require players to move their body, *Recovery Rapids* functions by providing users with tasks like rowing or grabbing fruit. These activities encourage users to stroke weakened limbs in a manner that re-teaches them how to move that portion of their body while strengthening the associated muscle groups. Thus the movements in *Recovery Rapids* mirror the upper body motions made while swimming, rowing, and reaching for objects. Given that the interactive nature of games can draw people in with even the slimmest of narratives and that people enjoy competing for higher scores (even against themselves), this type of design has a replayability factor that will encourage people to complete recommended physical therapy.

That convention was made not simply to adapt to non-gamers—there was a therapeutic benefit as well. The goal, says Crawfis, was to allow users to “carry over motor gains to their daily activities to a greater degree, an outcome that has been associated with greater brain reorganization.” In addition, the team had to develop gameplay and mechanics that could be adjusted to the physical limitations of each player—and that could adapt further as each user made progress or suffered from fatigue. They also wanted to enable medical professionals to keep track of each patient’s progress.



Clinical Trials

If you develop any medical product for which you claim a specific user benefit, that product—whether medicine or device—eventually must go through clinical trials. *Recovery Rapids* was no different.

As Games That Move You set out to test *Recovery Rapids* on stroke survivors, changing technology quickly became an issue during the trials. “We utilized three different versions of the Kinect throughout the project,” says Crawfis. “The initial versions of Kinect did not have support for recognition of hand movements, so we had to engineer our own stopgap hardware (this being a customized gaming glove) until there was a commercial product with this capability.”

At the same time, the trials began before Games That Move You had completed a consumer-ready version of the software. The trials were further complicated by the difficulty of monitoring in-home compliance and usage. Since compliance could not be assured, the team had to account for variable compliance in its analysis.

One particular challenge came from trying to track movements that the initial gaming systems were never designed for. “We wanted to allow the therapists to customize the treatment for each individual,” Crawfis says. “To accomplish this, we provided a gesture framework that is data-driven and broken into several reusable components. However, our gestures are not simply target zones like many games, but complex movements.” Therefore, in order to accumulate the 30+ hours of gameplay required, the team chose to rely on “procedural content generation—thus eliminating the need to prerender artwork for every level of the game.

Even with these various challenges and complications, Crawfis says that the clinical trials for *Recovery Rapids* were “much less expensive to conduct than other interventions with an equal amount of total therapy time”—largely due to the fact “only 1/7th of the face-to-face therapy time is required (compared to traditional constraint-induced movement therapy), with the remainder of the intervention provided through the game.” Crawfis calculates

the savings at roughly \$6,000 per patient—a 60% reduction in cost. It’s a savings that will enable future trials to have more participants to learn from.

The tests also revealed that developers could gather substantially more data over the course of the trial—resulting in a much richer dataset than could ever be captured in a conventional rehabilitation clinical trial.

Long-term Goals

Games That Move You is now gathering data on how patients with multiple sclerosis respond to *Recovery Rapids*. And although the game was initially designed



Games That Move You
Columbus, OH



to be used only while sitting down, the team is extending the game to strengthen the use of lower extremities as well.

The studio has continued to do research on new games that are customized for other conditions, including Parkinson’s and other diseases. They will also be experimenting with games that can be played in group settings. Eventually, the group’s work may extend to wearable technology in order to create other low-cost, portable, game-based therapy options.

Crawfis says that the studio sees “a need for games in standard physical and occupational therapy to motivate a person to perform many more movement repetitions than he or she would otherwise achieve, while making motor practice fun.” Here’s hoping they succeed. ❄

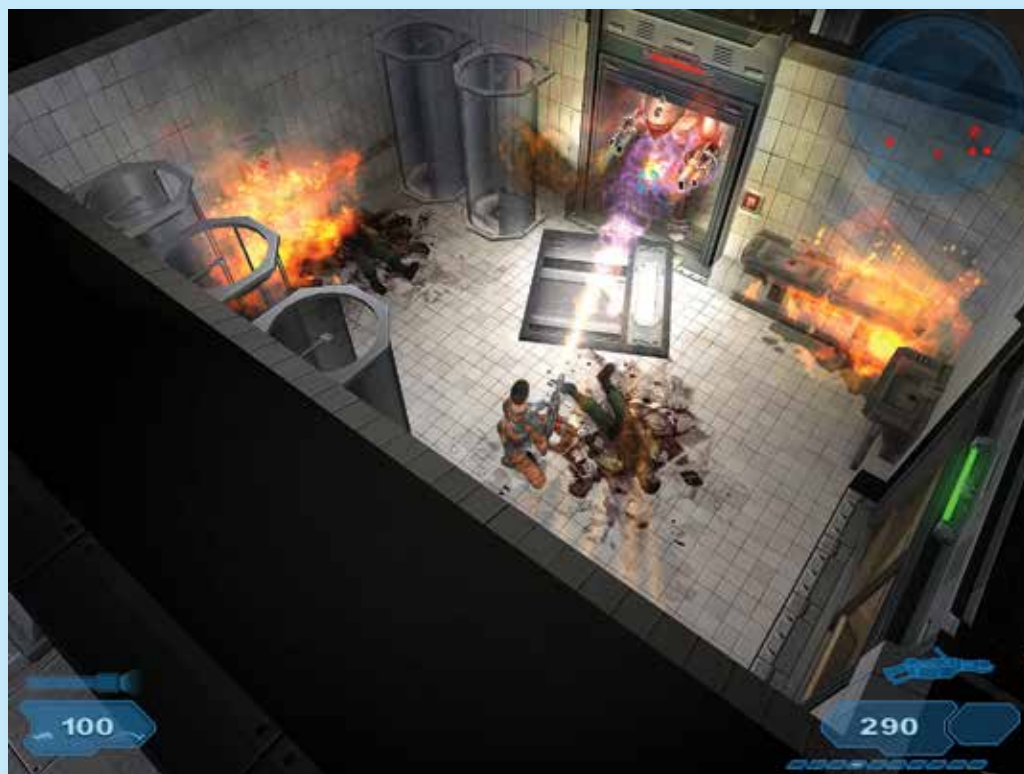
Game mechanics had to be intuitive, consistent with familiar, real-life activities.

Now We Are Talking

Frozenbyte talks about *Shadowgrounds* and *Trine*

Founded in 2001, Frozenbyte is a Finnish game studio known for the *Shadowgrounds* and *Trine* franchises. We spoke with Kai Tuovinen, the studio's marketing manager, to find out more about Frozenbyte's history, culture, positioning, and portfolio.

SHADOWGROUNDS





What were some of the reasons that Frozenbyte was created? Specifically, what sector of gaming was Frozenbyte aiming to succeed in?

Since around 1999, Lauri and Juha, the two founders of Frozenbyte, had a dream of making games. For the most part, however, they spent their time *playing* games rather than making them. So creating a company was the first step toward doing everything more professionally. In terms of target platforms, they always favored PC as a starting point due to its flexibility and approachability. You could pretty much make the types of games you wanted if you had the know-how.

If talking about game genres, the first game prototype was an RTS called *Disposable Heroes*, which was never published. I don't think there was a specific genre of games that Frozenbyte was aiming for, but there were lots of different ideas for sure.

Frozenbyte prides itself on putting the welfare of its team as a high priority. What are some examples of how Frozenbyte treats its employees?

We try to make life as easy as possible for everyone who works here by doing a lot of things ourselves. For example, everyone gets breakfast and lunch right at our workplace due to our great in-house catering, and we have things like a company moving van that anyone can borrow. There are also a lot of (voluntary) after-work activities such as board games, video games, laser tag and other stuff we like to do together, and we have a great team and atmosphere because of it.

It's rare for us to have crunch or overtime unless they're absolutely necessary, and that's because we mostly work on internal deadlines. From time to time there are (of course) exceptions—mostly related to console launches and other major events—but we try our best to keep up the no-overtime attitude.

We are also working on our approach to different game projects. We hope to be able to let everyone choose the project they want to work on, although at the moment we still need to complete our next major game before we can fully commit to this new philosophy.

Frozenbyte's first game, *Shadowgrounds*, was released in 2005. What was the inspiration for this game?

Shadowgrounds was sparked from a single lighting test that was made for *Disposable Heroes*—the terrain was made darker, and one of the characters got a flashlight with a bright light that created some sharp and impressive shadows. The test awed everyone at Frozenbyte, so *Disposable Heroes* was abandoned and the idea for *Shadowgrounds* (called *Alien Terror* at the time) was born. We also felt that this kind of game would



be easier to sell to publishers and release on consoles (Xbox), so those were intriguing aspects on the business side.

What were some classic games that influenced the development of *Shadowgrounds*?

There probably weren't that many. We based many decisions on the earlier RTS game and on individual opinions. We had the light-based gameplay mechanic and a lot of things came from that—although we didn't want to create a horror game. The movie *Aliens* was of course a big inspiration for many of the people working on the game, but on the game side there wasn't any single game that would have been mentioned that often during development.

What were some management lessons the studio learned during this production?

There were definitely some lessons learned *after* *Shadowgrounds* was published. The most important one was to plan ahead and have a follow-up project with a realistic and actionable plan after you've finished a game. We were a bit too ambitious (and also unfortunate) with *Jack Claw* and that project was nearly the downfall of Frozenbyte. If it wasn't for *Shadowgrounds: Survivor*, and later *Trine*, we probably wouldn't be here. This lesson was important for the *Trine* to *Trine 2* transition, and we perfected it with the *Trine 2* to *Trine 2: Goblin Menace* transition. It's a constant struggle though, and you can never make it perfect—otherwise creativity can suffer.

Now We Are Talking

The sequel to Shadowgrounds, Shadowgrounds: Survivor, was released in 2007. What were some of the ways you wanted to expand on Shadowgrounds?

We wanted to explore multiple characters, and perhaps mess around with other playable mechanics such as mechs and turrets. Admittedly *Shadowgrounds: Survivor* was also a way for us to get some much-needed cash flow, and it's perhaps the project that we most felt we "needed" to do because of financial reasons and others. It shows in the final game too, although it still turned out fine given the resources and the schedule we had. It definitely could have benefited from an extra six months of development time though, in hindsight.

Are there any plans for a third Shadowgrounds?

The *Shadowgrounds* series is something we still keep at the back of our minds from time to time. We've had some initial ideas and concepts that might surface again at some point, but nothing besides those yet. So we don't have any active plans for a third installment just yet. But never say "never."

The iPhone was released in 2007 and help energize the mobile/casual gaming market. How did this market change impact how Frozenbyte approached game development?

We've always been a PC/Console developer at heart, and the mobile side hadn't interested us much due to the limiting hardware. However we were developing *Splot* for Nintendo DS already in 2007, and with the release of the iPhone we saw some new potential in mobile gaming. I think we were intrigued by the idea of mobile games since they were quite different from what we had typically worked on, and there was definitely room for some great games on those platforms.

So overall, it sparked interest within the *Splot* project, and we decided to funnel that interest onto the iPhones and similar devices. But with our main focus still remains on console and PC-side development.

Trine was released in 2009. What was the inspiration for this game?

Trine was originally a hobby project of one of our senior programmers, Jukka, who was one of the first Frozenbyte employees. At some point after the failure of *Jack Claw*, when the company was looking into other future projects, his prototype got some spotlight and it ended up becoming a project for Frozenbyte as a whole.

The original inspiration came from eight-bit games that Jukka had enjoyed, but during the transition from a hobby project to a Frozenbyte game, the mechanics and style were almost completely revamped.



Jukka had his own inspirations for sure, some MSX games for example, but besides that everybody had their own inspirations and there was no single source for it. We decided to go full-on color, though, and have some fun with the whole fantasy setting. There were a lot of games at the time that were really dark and grim, lacking color, so it made sense that way too. We also drew some inspiration from old fairytales, or rather the "idea" of them and how we remembered them from our childhood. It all meshed together pretty well.

What prompted Frozenbyte to release the level editor for Trine and Trine 2? Is there any concern that allowing consumers to create their own levels may undermine the sales of Trine 3?



TRINE 2



Now We Are Talking

We had thought of releasing an editor at some point for the *Trine* games but we always felt that it was too complex for a public release. There's very limited documentation for the editor (almost none) and we had always trained our new employees how to use it, so releasing it to the average player felt very troublesome. We thought that the editor would need a lot of simplification and guides for it to be viable, so it was not originally planned for release.

However, at some point there was a change. Jari, our Senior Producer (Lead Programmer at the time) and I were attending the Steam Dev Days in early 2014, and we saw a presentation on user-made content by one of the Valve staff. They encouraged people to release tools for the community, even despite the fact that they would be difficult to use. I think that's where the idea came from. We decided to go for it with some small modifications and a Wiki page. Getting user-made maps was always something we thought would be awesome, so all we needed was a little encouragement.

I think we'll see a lot of great maps made by the community—there already are. And I don't think they will undermine the sales of *Trine 3* at all. I see it more as a way to maintain the interest in the *Trine* games in the meantime. Besides, the custom maps are actually very good. You should definitely try them out if you haven't.

As for *Trine 3*, we'll have quite a few things up our sleeve, so when we do announce it, it's going to be very exciting to show off!

Given that over seven million copies of *Trine* series have been sold, are there any plans on expanding *Trine* into other media?

I don't think we'll see that yet. If the next *Trine* becomes big we might consider other media, but we're a game developer first and foremost, so we make games. Expanding to other media like merchandising or film is something we're not familiar with, and at this point we haven't really considered it.

The visual style for *Splot* is different from *Trine* and *Shadowgrounds*. What was the origin for this game and its distinct look?

Splot started out as a Nintendo DS game created by one of our oldest employees and his friend, and it transitioned to a company project early on. So it's actually a bit similar to how *Trine* was born. We loved the characters and the graphical look. The gameplay went through a lot of phases and we were never quite happy with it, until finally now in 2014 when we released it for iOS. It became a great game and we're proud of it, although we hope to never go through a seven-year development period again!

What are some of the biggest changes in the gaming industry that Frozenbyte has had to adapt to over its 13+ year history?

I think one of the biggest changes during the decade we've been in business is the shift from using publishers to self-publishing, and we've definitely welcomed that change. This is of course a product of the increasing digital publishing possibilities, which has been another major change.

Also the shift towards gaming on mobile devices has been very prominent, but I think for us the impact hasn't been as huge as for the games industry in general—because our focus has been on the powerful high-end devices (although mobile devices are catching up rapidly).

Specifically, how do you think being an independent studio has changed since 2001?

Although we were an "independent" studio in 2001, I think a lot has changed for us since then and for other studios. We're now free to choose the projects we work on without having to please investors or publishers, and we're also free to choose which platforms and devices to target.

It's a lot easier nowadays to create an independent studio due to the number of digital channels where you can distribute your games—as well as the many more potential devices you can target. At the same time, the competition is huge, and breaking through can be difficult. ❄️



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